

ENVIRONMENT

# The agouti – most widely hunted game mammal in TT

OF the many plants and animals that are found in our country, the agouti is certainly one of the better known species of animals.

More formally referred to as the red-rumped agouti (*Dasyprocta leporina*), these medium sized mammals are found in forests, light woodland and agricultural plantations on both islands. Outside of Trinidad and Tobago, the red-rumped agouti is found throughout north-eastern South America.

The agouti is a member of the rodent family and essentially resembles a large rat with a greatly reduced tail. It possesses powerful incisors and has very short fur, the colour of which can vary but is usually brown with shades of dark brown, red or black. Eleven species of agouti have been formally recognised, all belonging to the genus *Dasyprocta* but only *Dasyprocta leporina* is found in Trinidad and Tobago. It should be noted however, that the work of Prof Gary W Garcia, of The University of the West Indies, has highlighted the



THE agouti is a widespread resident of our forests. PHOTO BY KRIS SOOKDEO

possibility that these different species of agouti might simply be different colour forms of a single species.

Agoutis are herbivores and will feed on leaves, flowers, fallen fruit and seeds. Studies have shown them to be important contributors to the health of forests, as an agouti will bury seeds that it cannot consume immediately, some of which may

then be forgotten and germinate, facilitating the wide diversity of tree species in the forest. In captivity, they can adapt to a wide range of household fruits and vegetables.

When they are not foraging for food, agoutis are likely to be found in their dens which may be in earthen burrows, hollow fallen tree trunks or stone crevices. Their adaptability to a



## The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

wide range of habitats and food sources means that agoutis are fairly easy to domesticate and extensive studies have been carried out in Trinidad on their potential for intensive wildlife farming.

They are generally very shy animals when encountered in the forest, quickly bolting away through the undergrowth. However, in areas where they are not persecuted, they can become quite tolerant of people and will often permit the approach of

human observers to within a few feet.

The agouti, of course, is well known on account of being the most widely hunted game mammal in the country. Notwithstanding the disputed accuracy of hunting data forms, it was reported that 23,911 agoutis were taken during the 2012/13 season. This compares to just 5,007 tattoos (*Dasyus novemcinctus*) – a ratio of five agoutis for every one tattoo that was taken (the tattoo is the second most widely hunted game mammal in TT). The ratios are even greater for the other species, with the wild hog (*Tayassu tajacu*) being taken at a ratio of 62 agoutis for every one wild hog. Despite this popularity, the agouti remains a widely distributed species and can be found throughout the island in suitable habitat. While generally common, numbers are noticeably lower in areas subject to intense hunting pressure.

There is a good reason for the popularity of agoutis with hunters. It is a diurnal species, meaning that it is

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# Commercial poaching a serious threat to wildlife

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active during the daytime, and this makes it more accessible to hunters and their dogs (in contrast, most of our other game species are more active at night). Fortunately, like many members of the rodent family, agoutis are fast breeders, with experiments in captivity suggesting that there is no clear breeding season. This suggests that agoutis in the wild are probably capable of breeding throughout the year if conditions are right.

Outside of human beings, a wild agouti is probably preyed upon by large snakes such as the macajuel (*Boa constrictor*) and large birds of prey. It has sometimes been alleged that the ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) is a major predator of agouti, and while an ocelot will undoubtedly take the occasional agouti, these forest cats are largely nocturnal and are therefore most active at night when agoutis are safe in their burrows. Thus, it is debatable whether



IN this *Newsday* file photo, game wardens display the carcasses of an agouti and a tattoo seized from a wild meat vendor, after the closure of hunting season in 2011.

ocelots are actually major predators of agouti in Trinidad.

While it is unlikely that agouti populations face a serious threat of extirpation at this point, studies that have been done in the Central Range of Trinidad indicated that the agouti population density there was

much lower than in other parts of their range. As such, it is advisable that the population of agoutis in different regions of the country be regularly surveyed as a part of our national wildlife management policy. Such information will allow the authorities to take action, if needed,



THE agouti can also adapt to altered environments, including agricultural plantations and residential areas. PHOTO BY GRAHAM WHITE

to ensure that these populations remain at sustainable levels.

Indeed, a more proactive approach to management is needed for all our wild game species, in particular those which are at greater risk of extirpation from the many threats that they face. Consider the threat of poaching. The commercial poacher poses a significant threat to all game species. Rather than dedicate limited state resources trying to eliminate it, a more appropriate approach would be to remove the rationale for commercial poaching in the first place. Commercial poaching is an economic activity and it stands to reason that if poachers cannot benefit financially from their actions, then they will have no reason to continue poaching. The same applies to commercial hunting which, while legal, is also a significant threat.

To this end, the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club supports a complete ban on the sale of all wild-caught meat (ie the meat of wild animals as

opposed to that of farm bred animals). Complementing such a ban must also be a significant increase in the applicable fines, so that the financial risks involved in poaching and commercial exploitation of our wildlife far outweigh any possible financial benefits.

This ban will have implications for the related issues of wildlife farming and wild meat importation, but these implications will be addressed in a later article. The Club believes that banning the commercial sale of wild-caught meat would curtail commercial exploitation and help ensure that wildlife populations and sport hunting are both sustainable in the long run.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@tfncl.org](mailto:admin@tfncl.org) or visit our website at [www.tfncl.org](http://www.tfncl.org). The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on May 8 at St Mary's College, PoS.

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