

FEATURES

# The monkeys of Trinidad

KRIS SOOKDEO

**SURPRISING, there are many people in Trinidad who are not aware that we have monkeys living in the wild. Even those who know about them may have never actually seen one in real life. While Tobago does not have monkeys in present times, Trinidad is home to two native monkeys – the red howler monkey and the white-fronted capuchin.**

The red howler monkey (*Alouatta macconnelli*) is a large primate with reddish brown fur and a long tail. It inhabits forests throughout – from Chaguaramas in the north to Matura in the east, down to Guayaguayare in

the south east and Cedros in the south west. While they once inhabited the central parts of the northern range, troops (which is how a group of monkeys are collectively referred to) are no longer found there, possibly killed off by disease (more on that later).

They are called howler monkeys because of the loud but low-pitched, rumbling cry that they make. These vocalisations are used for communicating – both for keeping the troop together and for ensuring rival

troops keep their distance. The low frequency cries travel far in their forest environments and

is an effective tool in the leafy canopy where visual communication is less effective. Red howler troops are particularly vocal during or immediately after rain has fallen during the daytime and observation of this collective chorus lends support to the Trinidadian saying, “sun shining, rain falling, monkey marrying”.

Like most monkeys, red howlers eat a variety of plant material including fruits and leaves. They must eat large quantities of plant material to get the nutrition they need.

As a result, they must spend a lot of time digesting meals and it is not uncommon to find a troop lounging quietly in the trees overhead.

Being a primate, the red howlers have a close genetic relationship to human beings. Yet despite this, they are targeted by poachers for the wild meat trade. This is, of course, an illegal act but sadly it continues today.

The close genetic relationship also enables some viruses to affect both monkeys and humans. In Trinidad, the link between red howlers and yellow fever has been well documented. The monkeys serve as a natural reservoir for the yellow fever virus, and every ten years or so the viral load in the monkey popu-



The tufted capuchin is not native. PHOTOS BY JEROME FOSTER



The red howler monkey.

lation reaches a critical threshold and large numbers of monkeys may die or get sick. Outbreaks like this may explain why red howlers no longer inhabit the central parts of the Northern Range.

The virus is typically spread by certain mosquitoes (*Haemagogus* and *Sabethes* sp.) found in our forests and so would not normally find its way into urban centres. However, if humans (be it naturalists, woodcutters or hunters) happen to be in the forest during one of these peak viral periods, they stand a chance of being bitten by one of these mosquitoes carrying the virus.

The now infected human returns to the urban areas where that most maligned of mosquitoes, the *aedes aegypti*, just so happens to be a suitable vector for the yellow fever virus. The

*aedes aegypti* then spreads the yellow fever in the human population. As a result of this, reports of deaths of red howlers in our forests are monitored by health officials and serve as a useful warning of a possible yellow fever peak period.

The other native primate is the white-fronted capuchin (*Cebus albifrons trinitatis*). The capuchin is a much smaller monkey than the red howler. It has creamy white or yellowish fur and long, slender arms and legs. These features make the capuchin a much more agile monkey than the howler. They also allow the capuchin to access a more diverse food range and they will eat insects, eggs and small reptiles.

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FEATURES



The white fronted capuchin

# Monkeys not exotic meat for the pot

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Unlike the howlers, the capuchin is found in only a few areas, being limited

primarily to Nariva and the Trinity Hills. Smaller troops may still be found in the north-west Northern Range.

The subspecies of white-fronted capuchin is endemic to our island (found nowhere else) and is classified as "critically endangered". While not hunted for meat, the capuchin is sometimes captured for the pet trade. Sadly, as monkeys destined to be pets are raised from infancy, the usual way to acquire a baby monkey involves killing the adult.

A baby monkey will cling to its mother for a long time after they are born to be able to suckle and for protection and mothers, understandably, will not willingly part with their offspring. As a result, poachers will shoot females with young in order to capture the baby. By shooting a monkey in a tree there is a good chance that the fall will either kill or cripple the baby monkey, not to mention the risk of shooting the baby as well as the mother.

The practice of keeping monkeys (of any species) as pets should not be tolerated.

There is a third species of monkey to be found here. However, it is not native to our island.

The tufted capuchin was introduced to the Chaguaramas peninsula many years ago. Reports of these capuchins in the area have been documented as early as the 1960s and are believed to be the result of the thriving illegal wildlife trade between Trinidad and Venezuela. Larg-

er and more aggressive, these monkeys are slowly but surely making their way east through the Northern Range. Like the native capuchins, they are omnivorous. It is possible that their presence will eventually pose a threat to the ecosystem or compete with native capuchins when they arrive further east. However, this possibility is yet to be studied in any detail.

Our monkeys are a very special part of Trinidad's fauna.

The excitement of seeing a troop of monkeys in the wild is rivalled by few other sights, and as intelligent creatures that are as closely related to human beings as they are, we are inclined to form a special bond with them. We should not see them as entertaining pets to be put in a cage or as exotic meat for the pot. Rather they should be left free to live in our forests.

We all have a duty to protect them and ensure that they inhabit our forests for a long time to come.

For more info on our natural environment: contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) or at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org) and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: "The Biodiversity and Conservation of the Aripo Savannas" by Lisa James.

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