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Blue and gold macaw

A true Trini treasure

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AS a traveller making your way to the departure lounge at the Piarco International Airport you may have noticed its photo plastered across the wall. Or maybe you see it every time you use your bank card. I am referring to the stunningly beautiful blue and gold macaw (*Ara ararauna*). This macaw has inspired countless pieces of art, from Carnival costume designs to local hand-crafted jewelry with its golden chest and blue wings.

The blue and gold is Trinidad's only native large macaw and has a pure white face lined with greenish-black feathers, a green forehead and a black throat. Like all other macaws it has a massive bill and strongly graduated tail. Despite its harsh calls it has managed to become a highly sought-after pet with its impressive ability to mimic speech and bond closely with its owner. Unfortunately most owners do not consider the fact that macaws are not domesticated animals and far are better suited for life in tropical forests, savannas and palm swamps. The life of a captive macaw is quite different from a wild macaw.

Unlike caged macaws, wild macaws travel vast distances to find food and will set out in search of sustenance the very instant the sun rises. Blue and gold macaws



A blue and gold macaw in the wild

are seed predators which means they have the potential to increase tree species diversity in tropical forests by hindering the breeding success of more common species. Bird owners tend to mostly feed their pet macaws seed blends, but their diet in the wild includes fruit pulp, young leaves, flowers, bark and even insect larvae. Their dietary flexibility allows macaws to switch to leaves and bark as fruits become scarce. Furthermore macaws may travel outside of their habitats to find additional food resources. In Trinidad we are fortunate to have a population of these

macaws at the Nariva Swamp where they feed on moriche palm, cocorite palm, balata, cajuca, wild guava, and hairy pois doux. Unfortunately palm swamps across the island are under threat from fire and farming. Macaws within these swamps are therefore more likely to come into contact with humans, sparking conflicts and increasing their chances of being captured and traded as landscapes are altered.

Between feeding sessions the flock usually gathers on the same tree to rest and preen. Pairs use this time to strengthen their bond

by preening each other (allo-preening) and playing, remaining almost constantly together. Sometimes they briefly separate to preen themselves (autopreening) or climb to another branch. Allo-preening and courtship feeding increase leading up to the breeding season, which runs from December to May. Blue and gold macaws are able to reproduce at three to four-years-old. They primarily rely on dead royal palm and moriche palm for nesting cavities. After about five years dead palms fall to the ground making nest site availability a serious concern for their

survival, since they reoccupy nests in consecutive breeding seasons. Both male and female inspect and use their beaks to remodel cavities making them comfortable and cosy. The pair will not hesitate to physically defend its nest from non-breeding macaws.

Trinidad's blue and gold macaws in particular may face competition for nest sites from non-native species; scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*) and green-winged macaws (*Ara chloropterus*) that have escaped captivity or been released on purpose.

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Sageguard these intelligent birds

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During this time males feed the females, which triggers a hormonal cascade, resulting in the laying and incubation (28-34 days) of two to four round white eggs. Although all eggs may hatch only one to two chicks survive. Consequently reproductive output is low for large macaws.

It is amazing how macaw chicks go through developmental milestones just as human children do. Chicks are born featherless and blind with large feet. They grow baby feathers which at first gives them a spiky look but as they grow into adults the feathers lay smooth. Over time their white facial patches will also age and wrinkle. Both parents are involved in preening and females feed them by regurgitation. Their large feet allows them to be fed without toppling over. Parents communicate with their young using their calls; over 500 sounds are used by wild macaws, as well as gesturing with a foot, wing or beak to communi-



Close-up of a macaw.

cate where to walk or what to eat.

They have soft calls that over-time change into the loud squawks that we anticipate whenever we see a macaw.

Playing with small sticks and

leaves gives them the muscle co-ordination needed to manipulate food with their feet. They climb trees, learn to socialise with other macaws through play fighting using their feet and beaks

and beating each other with their wings by hanging upside down and flapping.

At three months the young macaws are able to leave the nest for very short distances. By this time

parent macaws begin to provide less food and they are encouraged to fly further away from the nest until they establish daily flights between the nest and feeding areas. Parents show them where to find food by initially leading them to trees that have small fleshy fruits which young macaws will find easy to manipulate and eat. After about a year they leave their parents and spend more time with the flock.

Blue and gold macaws are strong and intelligent birds. They help keep our natural areas healthy, radiant and rather noisy. Indeed we should safeguard this treasure and give them the respect and understanding they deserve.

Photos by Vishal Rangsammy

For more information on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfnfc.org or visit our website at www.tfnfc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages.



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