

## ENVIRONMENT

# The fork-tailed flycatcher - Prince of the sky

FOR the next few months, if you happen to be outdoors in the afternoon, take a look up in the sky about an hour or two before sunset. With some luck, you will be in time to see a flock of remarkable birds flying overhead. You may have wondered what these beautiful long-tailed birds were. You also may have noticed that they were all flying in the same direction. Every year they faithfully return to our shores and you see them in their hundreds in the early mornings and late evenings as they dutifully go about their lives with elegant feathers trailing behind them.

These birds are fork-tailed flycatchers (*Tyrannus savana*). They are stately characters, cloaked in dark wings and a white underside. In addition, they are crowned with black caps. Their name, of course, is on account of the adult bird's spectacular tail feathers, which trail up to 40cm behind them. Females have relatively shorter tail feathers while young birds have short "regular" looking tails. The sight of an adult male fork-tailed flycatcher with its feathers blowing in the wind is priceless.

The significance of this flycatcher's long tail is not precisely known but could be an indicator of the bird's health — sick or weak birds are probably likely to have shorter tails. This could then allow breeding females to select the healthiest male to breed with — an example of what biologists



AN ADULT fork-tailed flycatcher is a sight to behold. PHOTOS COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

call "sexual selection".

The fork-tailed flycatchers are visitors from South America, gracing our savannas, marshes and other open areas between the months of June to September. Areas like the South Oropouche lagoon and Caroni swamp are ideal places to see them. During the rest of the year they range from Argentina to southern Mexico. Interestingly, there are in fact two different races of fork-tailed flycatcher that visit Trinidad and Tobago but telling them apart can be difficult for the casual observer.

For most of the time the flycatchers are silent, with the exception of the occasional sharp "chirp". Silence, however, does not mean that they are boring. In fact, they are extremely active. These flycatchers are very aggressive, regularly chasing other birds that happen to come



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too close. This applies not only to large threatening birds, like hawks and vultures, but also smaller birds that share their habitat. They perch on exposed twigs and wires from which they keep a look out for intruders or food. As their name implies, these birds feed mainly on insects, hawking them in the air or picking them off the vegetation. They will also eat small fruits and



OTHER than the tail, these birds can be identified by their black caps and dark wings. The rest of the bird is white.

berries when the opportunity arises.

In the late afternoon, large numbers of these birds can be seen flying towards a communal roost, which tends to be in a safe location, such as mangrove surrounded by water, or an isolated tree in a forested area. If you live around San Fernando, for instance, you will see these birds flying northward towards the Claxton Bay mangroves. They do not fly in a tightly spaced flock like many other birds. Rather, they spread out over a large area and the entire flock can take several minutes to fly over.

The fork-tailed flycatcher is

just one of hundreds of beautiful birds that can be seen in our island and we encourage everyone to take some time to observe our feathered friends. By learning more about the wildlife we have, we would be better positioned to preserve them for future generations.

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 14 August 2014 at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain.