

ENVIRONMENT

Sharing your garden with beautiful tanagers

HAVE you ever forgotten a bunch of bananas outside and returned only to find it pierced and pecked to bits. Have you been eyeing a large julie mango for days as it ripened on the tree, only to find it half-eaten when you finally go to pick it? If the answers to either of these "yes" chances are you have tanagers in your garden!

The tanagers (tan-adge-ers) are group of passerine birds, confined entirely to the Americas. Trinidad and Tobago is home to several species of tanager (the most recent revision to the family Thraupidae results in a list of 32 species in TT) and three of these are particularly well known, even to people living in relatively urbanised environments. They are the blue-gray tanager, the palm tanager and the white-lined tanager.

The blue-gray tanager (*Thraupis episcopus*) is commonly known as the "blue-jean" on account of its lovely blue feathers. If you look closely, you will also see a patch of indigo feathers on its wing which only adds to its beauty.

The palm tanager (*Thraupis palmarum*) is a more sedate-looking bird, being a dark, mossy green with a bit of olive-yellow on its head. Identifying the white lined-tanager (*Tachyphonus rufus*) is less straightforward as the male and female of this species look very different from each other. Males are jet black with a streak of white under the wing, which is briefly flashed as they flick their wings or while in flight. The females are chocolate brown with no white underwing patch. This species is sometimes referred to as the "parson bird".

These three species all share similar habitats, and are found anywhere from forest and light woodland to swamps and semi urban areas. They all feed readily on ripe fruit and are thus easily attracted to garden birdfeeders -and your prized julie mangoes! In addition, they will also feed on insects and can be seen chasing after the winged termites ("rain-flies") that have taken flight after a rainstorm. The palm tanager is often seen hunting for insects among the fronds of palm trees, and is locally known as the "palmiste" as a result.

THE female white-lined tanager.



THE blue-gray tanager or blue-jean



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THE male white-lined tanager or parson-bird. PHOTOS BY NIGEL LALLSINGH

Birds' melody a confused blend

●TANAGER from Page 3B

All three species construct a simple cup-shaped nest, often placed at the base of a bromeliad or under the eaves of a house. None of these tanagers are particularly musical. The calls of the palmiste and blue-jean are very similar (if not identical), and consist of a confused mixture of squeaks and whistles. The parson bird tends to limit itself to regular, clucking sounds with the occasional whistle.

The vocal similarities between the blue-jean and the palmiste are not a coincidence as they are very closely related and often form mixed-species flocks. They are so close in fact that it is thought that palm tanagers and blue-gray tanagers may, on rare occasions, interbreed in the wild, producing offspring that share colour characteristics of both parents.

These three tanagers are beautiful and charismatic visitors to any garden. So please don't grudge them a few mangoes or bananas every now and then. In fact, why not construct a simple birdfeeder and start enjoying these beauties today!

This feature was written by Kris Sookdeo with photographs by Nigel Lallsingh. For more information on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfn.org or visit our website at www.tfn.org.



THE palm tanager or palmiste.

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