

ENVIRONMENT

# A slice of paradise

By KRIS SOOKDEO

**TO MANY people it represents a waste of space filled with mosquitoes and snakes. To others, it is an empty lot where rubbish could be tossed. To me, it is a slice of paradise.**

In sub-urban and rural areas, empty lots like this, perhaps once cleared but now overgrown, provide an important refuge for wildlife.

The practice of paving empty space on residential properties, either with oil sand or concrete, is becoming more and more prevalent. So now our wildlife, which previously eked out a living in bushy backyards laden with mango and pommerac trees, have been forced out of our communities.

Don't discount how productive these spaces are. Obviously the diversity of life in an isolated lot depends on many factors, such as proximity to a biologically rich area like a forest edge, but even the most degraded of bushy lots attracts highly mobile species such as birds or insects. For example, it might surprise you to know that the ferruginous pygmy-owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*) can sometimes be found on the



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

Brian Lara Promenade in Port of Spain!

But back to my slice of paradise. With a busy road to the front, where music trucks and passenger vehicles with speakers blaring pass regularly, and houses on either side, it is a blessing to have a woody lot behind our house. A few palmiste palms (*Roystonea oleracea*), some swamp immortelle (*Erythrina fusca*) and several jamun trees (*Syzygium cumini*) dominate the scene. Black-sage (*Cordia curassavica*), candle-bush (*Piper species*) and numerous vines fill in the spaces between.

The swamp immortelle is still in bloom, rather late in their flowering season. Several hum-



A HARMLESS parrot snake.

mingbirds are around, taking advantage of the lingering blossoms. Bananaquits, caciques and orioles have also joined in the feast. After the flowers have fallen, the numerous seedpods attract flocks of noisy orange-winged parrots (*Amazona amazonica*) which will strip the pods to get at the seeds inside.

One of the palmiste palms has died; victim perhaps of the red palm mite that is destroying so many of our coconut estates. I hope that a passing parrot might

discover the stump and find it a suitable nest site.

An unusual visitor shows up now and then - a squirrel (*Sciurus granatensis*). Perhaps it is someone's escaped pet, as this bushy lot is too isolated for it to have come from the distant forest edge. It looks much happier scurrying about the branches here than it would have been in its cage.

The jamun trees are a bit of a mixed blessing. Introduced from Asia, they have become natu-

ralised all over the country and produce a tangy fruit, eaten by people and wildlife alike. My aunt assures me that it is filled with antioxidants and Vitamin C. These are all desirable things, but the problem is that the tree has a tendency to become invasive and could out-compete native species in an area. They are, perhaps, useful in colonising and reforesting denuded areas where other trees would struggle to grow. Birds and bats will gorge on the fruit when available, leaving telltale purple stains on the wall or wherever they pass the indigestible bits out. Besides the bats, the occasional maniocou shows up at night and will enjoy my paradise until, inevitably, a group of hunters visit the lot.

Iguanas too have to be wary of hunters but I see them in my paradise far less than I would have expected. Perhaps they are too well hidden in the vegetation or perhaps none have colonised the bushy lot in a while. Sometimes a gorgeous parrot snake (*Leptophis ahaetulla*) will cross over the wall and into our garden. Perfectly harmless, they are easy to hold and release back over the wall to their proper habitat.

●PARADISE continues on Page 6B

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## ENVIRONMENT



GREENERY is soothing.

# Seeing the 'green value'

● PARADISE from Page 4B

Even without the wildlife, the trees themselves make the bushy lot valuable. Greenery is soothing. Look away from the jarring cars and houses and rest a while on the calm vegetation. But I think I love the sound of the wind blowing through the leaves on a warm day the best. Add in a few birds ramajaying in the shade and my paradise gets even better.

Perhaps one day the rest of the country will also see the worth of these green spaces. We could even reintroduce them to urbanised areas if we are willing to see the "green value" as opposed to just the commercial

value. Nature has a way of taking advantage of underutilised gaps in our environment. We just need to give it the chance and, if we are willing, we can all have a slice of paradise.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) or visit the website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org).

The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. This month's lecture is titled "What are colony cycles and what do they mean," by Christopher K. Starr.

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