

Africa's connection to our fauna

By KRIS SOOKDEO

AS PART of our nation's commemoration of Emancipation Day, celebrations will naturally focus on the human element. Africa's connection with our country is not, however, limited to this. In fact, Trinidad and Tobago and the African continent are connected in many ecological ways as well. This week we look at some of our nation's fauna that share a surprising link to Africa.

While plants are limited in their ability to move around, animals tend to be much more mobile and, in the animal kingdom, none are more mobile than the birds. With respect to the link between Africa and TT, there are several birds common to both regions.

Perhaps the most well-known example is the cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*). This egret is commonly seen in savanna and pastures, usually preferring to avoid the wetter areas that other types of egret favour. The name stems from its habit of following cattle and other large animals in order to catch any insects that might be disturbed by the larger animal's movement. Indeed, the cattle egret is often seen riding atop the cattle themselves. They have successfully adapted this technique to modern agricultural life and regularly follow tractor ploughs or lawn mowers in the hope of finding a meal.

What is their link to Africa? Cattle egrets were originally limited to the Old World, including Africa. However, between 1877 and 1930 the species established itself in South America and, based on the available evidence, it was apparent that they did so under their own strength, having journeyed most likely from North Africa and assisted by the trade winds. By 1951 they had spread to Trinidad and by the 1960s they had arrived



OUR CATTLE egrets came from North Africa.

in Tobago. While these egrets might be one of the most famous examples of shared afro-tropical/neotropical birdlife, they are far from being the only ones. Several birds are common to both regions, including the white-faced whistling-duck, fulvous whistling-duck, comb duck and striated heron. In terms of other animals, the lizard known as the wood slave (*Hemidactylus mabouia*) is also an African species.

Of course, these linkages can also originate from more ancient connections. Approximately 130 million years ago the landmasses which were to become South America and Africa were part of a much larger continent, joined at the seams, as it were. This would have facilitated the movement of many species to and fro.

The number of TT birds with links to Africa increases if you consider the pelagic seabirds such as the Audubon's shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), which nests on Little Tobago but spends the rest of its life far out at sea in the southern Atlantic between the two landmasses (subspecies of this shearwater can even be found in the seas off Madagascar).

Natural dispersion between Africa and Trinidad and Tobago is quite a feat. However, not all animal arrivals do so by natural means. Throughout the years, people have introduced several species either deliberately or inadvertently.

One such species which has become quite at home here is the tilapia. *Tilapia* (*Oreochromis mossambicus*) is native to southern Africa. As a popular food species, this fish is widely used in aquaculture and may have been introduced multiple times into our local drainages. Perhaps the first such introduction occurred when fish escaped from the Bamboo Grove farms into the Caroni. At least one account, suggests it was deliberately introduced into the Caroni drainage before this to provide food for poorer inhabitants of the area.

While tilapia from these waterways are harvested on a small scale, the negative effect on native freshwater communities far outweighs the benefits as these invasive fish eat a wide range of native plants and animals. Additionally, they negatively affect water quality by stirring up bottom sediments, thereby impeding light



TILAPIA ARE native to southern Africa.



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
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penetration.

There is another more recent animal introduction which has been the cause of much more concern. The African giant snail (*Achatina fulica*) made its way to Trinidad sometime before 2009 and was declared a notifiable pest in 2010. Not to be confused with our own native large snail (*Megalobulimus oblongus*), this species had previously invaded other countries in the Caribbean and South America so may have come from either region.

These snails pose a threat to domestic agriculture as they multiply rapidly and consume vegetable matter, as well to human health as they are hosts of a parasite that can cause

eosinophilic meningitis. They were initially located primarily in the Diego Martin area, however, have since spread to neighboring districts. While they present a threat to our food supplies at the moment, perhaps they might find themselves on our plates one day. In its native Africa, these snails are actually farmed and eaten as a protein source.

These are just some of our animal species which share a surprising connection with Africa and it is well worth the effort for any interested naturalist to investigate this link further. Rest assured, Africa's wildlife will continue to make its mark on our natural environment for a long time to come.

For more info on our natural environment contact the T&T Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org, our website at www.ttfnc.org, FaceBook and YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be on August 13, at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain and the lecture will be "Eco-tourism and conservation in T&T" by Robyn Bath-Rosenfeld, AWNC.

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