

FEATURES

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KRIS SOOKDEO

Land of the Hummingbird

eral unique features. Found only in the western hemisphere in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean, they are typically small, notable for their fast flight and impossibly fast-beating wings which give them ability to hover. It is this constant beating of the wings which produces the humming sound for which the birds are named.

They feed primarily on flower nectar which they need to fuel their fast metabolisms. It is quite amazing to see how different birds have evolved bills of differing lengths and shapes, suitable for feeding at different types of flowers.

They also feed on insects which provide much needed protein, and can often be found hawking at flies or searching for spiders at cobwebs. When feeding



The white-tailed sabrewing. PHOTO BY: FAYARD MOHAMMED

at flowers, hummingbirds usually do not perch, preferring instead to hover in front of the flower.

In TT, 18 different species have been recorded and can be found inhabiting a wide range of ecosys-

tems, from residential gardens, mangrove swamps to mountain forests. One of the commonest species found in local gardens is the copper-rumped hummingbird with its steely blue wings and coppery tones, and can



The tufted coquette

be frequently seen in your backyard. Near the forest edge you might see the extraordinary tufted coquette which looks like a miniature Carnival masquerader. Another species is the white-tailed sabrewing found only in Tobago and remote sections of northern Venezuela. Much could be said about the remaining species but space is limited.

TT has had a long history with the hummingbird. There are various accounts as to why TT was first christened the "Land of the Hummingbird"

but the actual reason had nothing to do with Amerindians, the Pitch Lake, or early explorers impressed with our bird life. It had to do with fashion. Reaching a peak in the early 20th century Europe, bird skins were a popular component of ladies' fashions, being incorporated into hats, bags and such. Countless birds were slaughtered to meet this demand and while small scale hummingbird hunting was conducted in Trinidad, it was South America that was the real source of much of the skins. However, Trinidad was a key collection and shipment point. Europeans receiving the skins simply saw TT as the country of origin and this led to the belief that TT was the source of all these wonderful hummingbirds – the land of the hummingbirds!

Fortunately, most people now look upon our hummingbirds with pride and awe, as living jewels in our gardens and forests rather than on clothing. Given their national status and the dark history we share, it is even more vital that we appreciate the diversity and wonder of these amazing little birds today, and protect their habitats in the future.

They are certainly far more valuable alive and in the wild.

For more info on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org, www.ttfnc.org or check us on Facebook and YouTube.



ASK ANYBODY in TT if they know what a hummingbird is and the answer will be in the affirmative.

The bird appears on several national symbols including the coat of arms and insignia of the protective services, and is the symbol of our national airline. However, few of us really know about our hummingbirds. Many probably think they are a single species. There is much to learn about them!

Hummingbirds are a family of about 330 birds that possess sev-

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