

FEATURES



The crested oropendola or yellowtail.

Meet the cornbirds

KRIS SOOKDEO

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO really is blessed with a dazzling array of birds. Whether you are an avid birdwatcher, a casual naturalist or just a lover of nature, there is a lot of variety on

display.

Birds that are particularly notable, perhaps for their song, colouration or habits, often acquire local or vernacular names. One such local name is the cornbird which is actually used to describe up to three different

species. The bird most people refer to as a cornbird is the crested oropendola (*Psarocolius decumanus*). Also commonly known as the yellow-tail, this iconic resident of forests and plantations is common in both Trinidad and in Tobago.

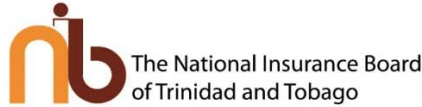
Several features make yellow-tails stand out. As you would have guessed, they have bright-yellow tails which are easy to observe at all times. Another outstanding feature is their startling display, in which male birds perch on a branch and tip over to display their tail, all the while uttering the most unusual warbling call and shaking their wings!

No doubt many a guest at our world famous Asa Wright Nature Centre have sat in wonder at this spectacle. But even if you have never seen their tails nor witnessed their displays, then you must have seen their nests! Yellow-tails construct long, graceful, stocking like nests. They can be several feet in length and old nests are sometimes stretched longer by the wind. Adding to the impact, these nests are seldom alone as yellow-tails nest in colonies and several will adorn their chosen tree.

The second cornbird is a smaller relative – the yellow-rumped cacique (*Cacicus cela*).

The cacique is mostly black with a yellow rump and wing patch. Like the yellow-tail, they also build stocking nests but these are much smaller. While an attractive bird in its own right, perhaps the most notable characteristic of yellow-rumped caciques is their song. Caciques are master composers and the sound of a cacique ramajaying with an endless variety of warbles, thrills and chirps is an absolute delight. To add to this, the cacique is a very good imitator and will readily insert bits of songs taken from other birds into its own song. I once came across a particularly ambitious cacique in Rousillac from whom I heard snippets of the calls of black hawk-eagle, gray-headed kite, gray-breasted spinetail, gray-necked wood-rail and gray-breasted crane, all in one session! Last but not least is the smallest cornbird – the yellow oriole (*Icterus nigrogularis*). The oriole is bold yellow with black patches on its throat, wings and tail.

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The yellow oriole or plainant bird.

FEATURES



The yellow-rumped cacique

Such talented birds

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It is common in gardens and is easily attracted to ripe fruit left out for them (its

local name is the plain-tain bird). They can produce a rather harsh grating call, but don't be fooled.

Yellow orioles are also melodious singers, preferring a series of ascending and descending whistles.

They too build stocking nests but yellow orioles, unlike the other cornbirds, do not nest in colonies. They prefer to build in isolation but often choose a nest site that overhangs water.

All three cornbirds share a habit of nesting near the nests of wasps.

This provides an obvious advantage as any predators rummaging through the tree in search of baby cornbirds, is likely to encounter some angry wasps! These cornbirds are all omnivores, eating both fruit and small invertebrates.

It is no coincidence that these birds have several similarities. The three cornbirds are members of the family Icteridae which also includes the equally well-known carib grackle (*Quiscalus lugubris*) otherwise known simply as the blackbird.

Thankfully, the cornbirds are all still common birds, easily observed in suitable habitat.

Put out a few ripe mangoes or plantains and the yellow oriole will fill your garden with its song and colour.

Take a drive out to a wooded area nearby and listen for the musical masterpiece of the caciques.

And, as the sun sets, look up at the sky and you might see the yellow tails heading home to their distant colony tree. What a talented family!

Photos courtesy Wikimedia. For more info on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfnf.org or visit our website at www.tfnf.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages.



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