

FEATURES

Nariva's natural treasures

KRIS SOOKDEO

IMAGINE being able to explore a lush wetland where regal palm trees tower overhead and where the sound of howler monkeys echoes all around you.

Imagine magnificent macaws flying through the air and anacondas lurking at the waterline. The Brazilian Pantanal perhaps? Or is it Venezuela's Orinoco River? Actually, the country is Trinidad and Tobago and the place is none other than the wetlands of our Nariva Swamp.

The Nariva Swamp encompasses a vast area, covering approximately 60 sq km along the eastern coast of Trinidad. As a freshwater swamp, the environment of Nariva is very different than that of the better known Caroni Swamp (which is predominantly brackish). The lack of salt means that herbaceous vegetation including water lilies, sedges and other aquatic plants can thrive.

A key feature of Nariva is the stately moriche palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*). The moriche has a very limited distribution in Trinidad,

being found elsewhere at the Los Blanquizaes Swamp and Erin Savanna in the south of the island and throughout the Valencia district, including the Aripo Savannas. These palms have a distinctive fan shaped leaf and produce a cluster of small, scaly fruit.

The fruit of the moriche is an important part of the diet of one of Nariva's inhabitants – the Red-bellied Macaw (*Orthopsittaca manilatus*). These intriguing birds depend on the moriche for food and shelter to such an extent that they are very difficult to keep in captivity and tend to have a very limited lifespan under man-made conditions. Indeed, their scaled chest feathers even resemble the outer surface of the moriche fruit!

Nariva is home to another special macaw. The Blue-and Yellow Macaw (*Ara ararauna*) once made the swamp their home until habitat destruction and capture for the pet trade resulted in the loss of the local population. The macaws nest predominantly in the dead trunks of palm trees and feed

on a wide range of fruits and seeds from the area. To capture them, people would shoot adult birds out of the air and steal the babies from their nest

the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust, a small population of free flying birds has been re-established in the swamp and it is once again possible to see the

in this series). Need more reasons why Nariva Swamp is so special? Well, within the swamp is a raised area known as Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctu-



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THE WHITE-FRONTED capuchin roams the Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary.

cavities. Unfortunately, this latter technique often meant cutting down the valuable nest trees which reduced the supply of nesting sites. Habitat destruction was the final nail in the coffin. However, thanks to the dedicated efforts of conservationists like Bernadette Plair of CRESTT, and

macaws flying wild. Nariva is also home to two environmentally sensitive species. The ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) and the West-Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) have both been recorded within the confines of the swamp (you can read more about these species in another arti-

ary. This sandy "island" was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1968 and is covered with dense forests which is home to both the red howler monkey (*Alouatta seniculus*) and white-fronted capuchin (*Cebus albifrons*), our only native primate species. Sharing the forest canopy with the

monkeys is the elusive prehensile-tailed porcupine and, down below, rare birds such as the rufescent tiger heron (*Tigrisoma lineatum*) can be found stalking the water's edge within the cover of the dense vegetation.

All of this was almost lost. While rice cultivation had been practised

in the area for a long time, it was the arrival of industrial scale rice farming in 1986 that saw to the destruction of hundreds of acres of forest and marshland. This was entirely illegal and for a while the government turned a blind eye to the destruction.

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Nariva a popular eco-tourism destination

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The big farmers, often residing outside of the district, saw an opportunity to make money at the expense of the local subsistence farmers who lost fishing and hunting grounds that they had depended on for generations. Vast swathes of forest were cut down and the drainage of the swamp was altered.

The swamp's salvation began when TT became a party to the Ramsar Convention. According to "Environmental Advocacy in the Caribbean: The case of the Nariva Swamp, Trinidad" produced by Nicole Brown for CANARI, the Wildlife Section first began enquiries about TT's accession to the Ramsar Convention in the early 1980s. In late 1987, the issue was revived by the TT Field Naturalists Club. In 1990, the Wildlife Section began pushing for government accession in earnest, and their efforts were supported by several entities including the Pointe a Pierre Wildfowl Trust, Pearl and Dean (an advertising agency) and the Toco Foundation.

It was the Pointe-a Pierre Wildfowl Trust which would become the biggest advocate for the swamp and eventually the government acted, becoming a party

to the Ramsar Convention and declaring much of the swamp as a prohibited area in 1993, and then forcing the end of rice cultivation in the prohibited area in 1997. The government, through the EMA and the Forestry Division, has since spent millions of dollars trying to undo the damage and employs residents of the surrounding villages in this effort.

Adding further support to the area was its declaration by the government as an Environmentally Sensitive Area in 2006.

The Nariva Swamp is now a popular eco-tourism destination and is better able to nurture the small communities which surround it. As a showcase for all that is special about our natural environment, the swamp takes pride of place as an example of how, with proper care and diligence, people and nature can co-exist. It remains one of the real treasures of our country.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tffc.org or visit our website at www.tffc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages.



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