

FEATURES

# Meet the manicou

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THE MANICOU (*Didelphis marsupialis*) is an animal familiar to most citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, many at least knowing it by name if not having actually seen one in person. Known more formally as the black-eared opossum, the manicou is a common inhabitant of forests, forest edge, agricultural plots and even semi-urban areas once there are a few trees around.

It is found on both islands, including some of the small islets that surround the country. Manicous are primarily nocturnal animals, becoming active in the late evening and retreating to



The manicou is a common inhabitant of forests and agricultural lands and even semi-urban areas.

their shelters at dawn where they will stay for the rest of the day. They spend the majority of their time in trees but will come to the ground to feed or travel to another tree if necessary.

Outside of TT, the manicou can be found inhabiting similar environments through large areas of the Americas from the

northern half of South America to Mexico. Around the size of a domestic cat, these animals are also found on several islands of the Lesser Antilles where they are also referred to as manicou (the word is apparently of Amerindian origin). The manicou is one of just over 100 species of opossum found throughout the

New World. Manicous are marsupials and, like the other opossums, they give birth to underdeveloped young which have to remain in their mother's pouch where their development can continue until they are old enough to leave. Even then, young manicou will stay close to their mother and will sometimes



The manicou (*Didelphis marsupialis*) is an omnivore, feeding on both plant and animal matter.

climb aboard her back as she moves about the trees. Genetic and fossil evidence suggests that an opossum-like marsupial from South America migrated to Australia (via Antarctica) 50 million years ago during a relatively warm period, and became the ancestor of the modern Australian marsupials – including kangaroos and koalas.

Part of the reason why this species is so widespread and able to survive in even semi-urban areas is its diet. The manicou is an omnivore and it feeds upon a wide variety of plant and animal matter

including fruit, small rodents and birds. This can sometimes be a problem for people, as manicou living near human settlements will occasionally attempt to raid chicken coops, fruit trees or garbage bins. Of course this can be hazardous for the manicou too, as it is commonly hunted for meat throughout the island.

During the hunting season it is fairly common to see roasted manicou being offered for sale along the roadways in certain parts of the country. The manicou is listed on Schedule III of the

Conservation of Wildlife Act which means it is treated as agricultural vermin.

As a result, landowners can hunt these animals both during and outside of the hunting season on their property without a permit.

Another typical encounter with the manicou for many people involves seeing one as it crosses a roadway at night. Indeed, there have been occasional reports of vehicular accidents which arise from people deliberately swerving to try and hit a manicou, no doubt hoping to add it to the pot.

Despite these dangers, the manicou remains a widespread species and it will no doubt maintain its place as one of our more well-known native animals.

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

The club's next monthly meeting will be held on April 14 at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain.

Lecture: "Ecology of the Crab-eating Raccoon in Caroni Swamp" by Laura Babbal.

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