

## FEATURES

# Why wait to conserve our wildlife?

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THIS week we revisit some of our suggestions for wildlife management. With a second round of public wildlife management consultations being held tomorrow, we hope that those in authority will give serious consideration to it.

The draft Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Conservation (FPAWC) Bill 2014 was in the midst of being reviewed and approved by various stakeholders at the time of the change in government administration.

The new laws (at least according to the draft bill) would have resulted in several long-awaited changes to our wildlife conservation laws and we urge that this opportunity not be lost.

We appreciate that with the administrative change, the government may wish to adjust its position but certainly it is not necessary to start from scratch and draft new laws as seems to be happening.

We look forward to seeing the proposals in that bill moving forward soon.

In the meantime, however, there is much that can be done while that process runs its course.

As the draft FPAWC Bill 2014 indicated concern over certain species, this amounts to the government recognising a valid threat, regardless of whether or not the final legislation is in place.

Remember, the National Wildlife Policy was passed by Cabinet since 2013, so the mandate for sustainable wildlife management is undeniable.

It is fully within the minister's powers to declare certain measures now to help address these threats.

Action does not have to wait for new legislation.

The draft bill indicates that the sale of "wild" meat, unless it is farm-raised, will not be permitted under the new legislation. Clearly this means



Waterfowl and other marshbirds should be fully protected by law.

that the State acknowledges that the sale of meat from animals caught in our forests and swamps is not sustainable or desirable.

It also runs counter to suggestions that commercial hunters have a right to personally benefit financially from a national resource. To this end, we believe that a moratorium on the sale of wild meat should be implemented immediately as this will serve as a useful measure for curbing commercial poaching until the new legislation and controlled wildlife farming can be brought on-stream.

While some of the more vocal hunters will argue otherwise, the reality is that many bona fide recreational hunters also agree with the banning of all wild meat sales. A ban on commercial sales would help to alleviate the pressure from commercial hunters and poachers.

This would allow for significant benefits to wildlife without alienating recreational hunters.

Freshwater habitats have disappeared dramatically since the collapse of the rice industry, and the pressures faced by freshwater birds are significant. While some species were included in the draft Fourth (pro-



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tected) schedule, we strongly believe that all ducks should be removed from the draft Fifth Schedule and be granted full protection.

The minister would be well advised to implement an indefinite ban on hunting of all waterfowl (ducks) and other targeted marsh birds such as herons and the limpkin given the aforementioned loss of wetlands. This can remain in place until the new legislation is complete.

The draft bill indicates that several of our seedeaters and seed finches are critically endangered. This sad state of affairs is a direct result of the state not moving quickly enough to save these species from commercial exploitation over the last 40 years or so.

To this end, a ban on the possession of our native seedeaters and seed finches (which have been identified as critically endangered in the draft bill) ought to be implemented.

The following species of seedeater should receive immediate protection via a moratorium on their capture and possession:

Picoplat or Grey Seedeater (*Sporophila intermedia*)

Chat or Lesson's Seedeater (*Sporophila boutronides*)

King Chat or Lined Seedeater (*Sporophila lineola*)

Tobago picoplat or Wing-barred Seedeater (*Sporophila americana*)

Silverbeak or Yellow-bellied Seedeater (*Sporophila nigricollis*)

Twa-twa or Large-billed Seed-finch (*Oryzoborus crasirostris*)

Robin or Ruddy-breasted Seedeater (*Sporophila minuta*)

Brazzo or Slate-coloured Seedeater (*Sporophila schistacea*)

For practical purposes, there is little point in including the most popular native cage bird on this list (Chestnut-bellied Seed-finch, *Oryzoborus angolensis*) as a history of over-trapping means that no viable local population remains, and these

days, all bullfinches have to be smuggled into the country (a separate issue). This way, the caged bird ban would be met with much less opposition than if bullfinches were to be included and the minister can offer much-needed protection to the other threatened species kept as cage birds.

In closing, although we trust that the passing of the draft bill into law will be prioritised in the coming months, in the meantime we at the Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club feel that the simple measures outlined above would have far-reaching benefits for our wildlife without triggering significant dissension. To this end, we hope that these measures would be given consideration:

A moratorium on the sale of wild meat.

A ban on the hunting of all waterfowl (ducks) and other large marsh birds.

A ban on the possession of our native seedeaters and seed finches (save and except for the popular bullfinch).

**For more info on our natural environment contact the T&T Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org), our website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org), Facebook and YouTube pages.**