

Predation by a Boa Constrictor (*Boa constrictor*) on a Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*) in Trinidad, W.I.

The Boa Constrictor (*Boa constrictor*) is a large, heavy-bodied snake inhabiting a diversity of habitats throughout most of South America. It is a dietary generalist, foraging on a wide variety of prey including shrimp, fish, lizards, birds and mammals (e.g., Sironi *et al.* 2000, Quick *et al.* 2005, Pizzatto *et al.* 2009, Sanches *et al.* 2018). In Trinidad its natural diet is poorly documented, with few prey identified to species (see reviews by Murphy 1997, Boos 2001), including two species of birds (Hayes 2002). In this note we document a Boa Constrictor preying on a Great Kiskadee (*Pitangus sulphuratus*).

At about 8:00 am on 27 January 2014, RLG observed a Great Kiskadee captured by a Boa Constrictor that was hidden within a metal pipe (Fig. 1) on the campus of Caribbean Union College Secondary School in Maracas Valley, Trinidad. The approximately 10 cm wide pipe extended several m above the ground and leaned at an angle of approximately 60°. The approximately 2 m long boa had climbed the pipe and sought shelter within it, and ambushed the kiskadee as it perched or attempted to perch on the pipe. The kiskadee appeared to be grasped by its abdomen, with a single coil of the snake wrapped around its midbody, underneath its wings (Fig. 1). The captured kiskadee struggled for more than a minute, remaining silent the entire time despite its head being free, until it grew still, but the snake, apparently alarmed by the approaching crowd of humans attracted to the commotion, released the bird, which flew away while the boa retreated into the pole.

The Great Kiskadee is a highly aggressive and vocal species that vigorously defends itself and its nest from potential predators (Brush and Fitzpatrick 2002), including snakes (Smith 1977, Skutch 1979, Jones and Saporito 2016). Thus, its silence during this predation attempt appears unusual. The only previously published report of a Boa Constrictor preying on a Great Kiskadee occurred in Brazil, while a kiskadee was foraging on fruits of a *Cecropia pachystachya* tree (Rocha Santos *et al.* 2014), but there was no mention of whether vocalization occurred during capture. Högstedt (1983) hypothesized that the primary function of fear screams in captured birds was to attract the attention of secondary predators who might attempt to steal the prey (kleptoparasitism), potentially allowing the victim to escape. Because potential kleptoparasites are more likely to use vision to detect captured prey in open habitats and to use hearing to detect captured prey

in closed habitats, Högstedt (1983) predicted that fear screams were more likely to be given by captured birds in closed habitats. Högstedt (1983) tested his prediction by comparing the frequency of fear screams given by birds removed from mist nets in different habitats, and found strong supporting evidence for his hypothesis. Because the Great Kiskadee typically inhabits open habitats (Brush and Fitzpatrick 2002), its silence while gripped by a Boa Constrictor is consistent with Högstedt's (1983)



Fig. 1. Boa Constrictor preying on a Great Kiskadee at Maracas Valley, Trinidad, 27 January 2014. Photo by Renis L. Gabriel.

hypothesis, although emitting fear screams likely would have been more effective in attracting the humans who interfered during the predation attempt.

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