THE name "chicken hawk" is used in Trinidad and Tobago to describe several species of raptor. Ask anybody you meet and they will tell you they have at least heard of a "chicken hawk," if not having actually seen one themselves.

This can be a bit of a problem as TT is home to several different species of hawks, falcons, kites and hawk-eagles (about 25 species) - all of which might get branded with the title chicken hawk at some point. Today, we'll look at one group in the family - the caracaras.

The yellow-headed caracara is a very common resident of Trinidad and, less commonly, Tobago. While similar in appearance to hawks, caracaras are actually members of the Falconidae, i.e. the kites and falcons.

Unlike the other members of the Falcon family, caracaras have specialised in feeding on carrion. For this reason, the yellow-headed caracara is able to inhabit a diverse range of habitats but with a preference for open areas including marshes, farmlands, savannah and even coastal areas. They can often be seen along roadways looking for roadkill - eating squashed frogs, snakes, lizards and insects.

Adults have a creamy, yellow-brown head and underparts with dark-brown wings that are crossed by a single pale bar. Immature birds, on the other hand, are heavily streaked with brown. Caracaras are gregarious, meaning that they tend to associate with one another in small groups.

If you are not sure about how to identify these interesting birds by their appearance, then you can certainly do it by their vocalisations. In fact, their call is often the first indication you may have that some caracaras are nearby as they have a very loud, screeching call. It is especially noticeable if they call when perched atop your roof. And thanks to their gregarious nature, you can often have a couple birds walking back and forth at each other. It is actually this unusual assortment of grating calls which originally gave rise to the name "caracara" (and is therefore unrelated to the Spanish word for "face").

While the yellow-headed caracara is a common bird of open areas.

The yellow-headed caracara is now found throughout the country; it was actually first limited to the offshore island of Chichacomico. One of the earliest, if not the first documented sighting there, was in 1942. From there, these birds began slowly colonising new areas and spreading eastwards. It was first found to be breeding in Trinidad in 1984. By 1987 it was detected in Tobago.

The adventurous, yellow-headed caracara is not alone in its quest to colonise new areas. The crested caracara, a close relative, has also been rapidly spreading.