

ENVIRONMENT

Icacos – a delight for birdwatchers

FOR many people, Icacos is probably best known for scenic coconut plantations, freshly caught fish and sea bathing at Columbus Bay. And while these are fine things indeed, there is much more to the area. Icacos is rich in biological diversity and, given both its proximity to Venezuela and relative isolation, it is particularly important for its birdlife.

Icacos is a very dry place. The area receives relatively little rain compared to the rest of the country, and under these conditions estate owners have long resorted to planting vast acreages with coconut trees. You would think that Icacos would be a birding wasteland with such a climate and lack of natural vegetation, but in fact, the area can be very rewarding for any birdwatcher willing to make the trip.

Perhaps the most striking attraction is the large lake situated by the Constance Estate. The main road actually passes through a section of this water feature and makes it a lot easier to see birds without having to be far from your vehicle. A visit to this wetland during the dry season, when water levels are low, can often reveal flocks of scarlet ibis, black-bellied whistling ducks and various egrets and herons. Pygmy kingfishers and greater anis regularly shelter in the mangrove fringes. With some luck you may even see a spectacled caiman cruising by from the comfort of your car.

Just before this is a large reed covered expanse, which is another excellent birding spot. Here, perfectly camouflaged pinnated bitterns creep amongst the reeds while cocoi herons wait patiently to ambush fish in the more open areas. During the dry season, scores of black-necked stilts will nest here.

Recently, birdwatchers were in for an extra treat when two jabirus (Jabiru mycteria) arrived in Icacos. The jabiru is a large member of the stork family, standing over a metre tall with a wingspan of over 2.5 metres. They are mostly white with long legs, a long black neck and a huge bill. A conspicuous red patch can also be seen on its neck. They are inhabitants of marshes and wetlands where they hunt for fish, reptiles and invertebrates.



BLACK-NECKED stilts breed in the swamp when water levels are low.



VERY rare visitors to TT, two jabirus were recently seen in the area.

Jabiru are not native to Trinidad and Tobago but are visitors from South America, possibly from the nearby Pedernales or Delta Amacuro region of Venezuela or maybe further afield from the Pantanal (they are iconic representatives of the Brazilian Pantanal, often appearing in media advertisements for the area's ecotourism industry).

These impressive birds have been rare visitors to Trinidad and Tobago in the past with only a handful of recorded sightings in



SCARLET ibis and egrets feeding in Icacos.

to escape the cold of winter in the southern hemisphere (roughly lasting from June to August). And because Icacos is just about seven miles from the mangrove fringed shores of Venezuela, it is not surprising that wandering South American species occasionally turn up.

Even without such rare visitors, birdwatching in Icacos can be a real treat, with rufous crab-hawks, savanna hawks and spotted tod-flycatchers being some of the other avian delights to be seen here. In light of this, it is crucial that residents and visitors respect the environment of Icacos. We should all be proud of it. The dumping of rubbish and the hunting of birds must be discouraged. The back-filling and drainage of the swamplands should cease. Small as they are, these wetlands must be preserved, not just for birdwatchers, but for all citizens of our beautiful country.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on Thursday September 11 at St Mary's College, PoS. Lecture: "Recording the biodiversity of TT" presented by Mike Rutherford of the UWI Zoology Museum.



recent years. Previously, this species has been seen in marshy areas like Nariva, South Oropouche and Buccoo Point.

The jabirus are not the only visitors to the area. Aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis*) have also been spotted recently. These birds of prey are also considered rare visitors to Trinidad and Tobago, typically found in savanna and marshlands where they hunt small birds and insects. Like the jabirus, they are visitors from South America but range as far north as Texas in the United States.

It is no coincidence that both these visitors are from South America. At this time of year, many birds are migrating northwards