

ENVIRONMENT

# The incredible lily-trotter

**THIS** weekend, how about taking an early morning trip down to a waterway near you and having a look at some of our native bird life? It could be a pond, a dam, a rice-field or perhaps even a flooded pasture. Once there, one of our charismatic wetland species that you are likely to encounter is the wattled jacana (*Jacana jacana*), otherwise known as the lily-trotter.

The lily-trotter is a very common resident of freshwater wetlands in Trinidad, found in a range of waterlogged or damp areas. While common in Trinidad, these birds are actually rare in Tobago (partially due to the scarcity of wetlands on the island). They are beautiful birds with chestnut wings and a black underside, neck and head. One striking feature is the red wattle at the base of the bill on both males and females which gives the bird its name.

The name lily-trotter, on the other hand is related to the bird's toes. Lily-trotters have very long toes and this gives them a unique ability. Longer toes allow them to better spread their weight over the surface on which they are walking, and this means that they can walk over floating objects such as lily leaves and pond weed, which ordinarily would not be able to



THE wattled jacana or lily-trotter is a very common resident of freshwater wetlands in Trinidad. PHOTO BY DAVID HUGGINS

support a bird of that size. This allows them to access a niche in the wetland environment that other birds cannot, and is an example of a species adapting to suit its environment. The ability to roam the otherwise inaccessible areas of the water's surface also allows them to build their nests out in "open" water – a useful trick as land predators such as mongoose and rats cannot reach them here. Jacanas construct a

crude floating nest of plant matter, often anchored to a floating plant such as a water hyacinth.

When it comes to reproduction, wattled jacanas have another trick up their sleeves. In many birds, females typically lay and tend to the eggs while her partner, depending on the species, either faithfully stays with her or moves on to mate with another female. The wattled jacana has reversed this traditional role. Male jacanas



construct the nest and will do all of the egg incubation while female jacanas, free of nest duty, may mate and lay their eggs in several different nests belonging to different males (once the males are not already incubating eggs or tending young chicks!)

Once hatched, baby jacanas will be cared for by the male parent, eventually following him about and foraging for a range of small invertebrates and plant seeds that comprise the jacana's diet. If threatened, the babies will actually dive into the water and remain submerged until the threat passes. Before they attain adult plumage, immature jacanas look rather different to their parents, sporting brown wings, white undersides and neck and a pink wattle.

Once mature, the birds will move to their own territories, as adults are fiercely territorial and birds can often be seen chasing

one another. They can be exceedingly noisy birds. The call of a jacana is a loud "tek-tek-tek" and in some parts of Trinidad the bird is known as the "tek-teky" as a result of this. Jacanas have a bright yellow patch of feathers on their wing that is visible in flight. They will use this patch in display or as a warning to other birds, often holding their wings aloft to display the patches. This display also reveals a sharp spur on the bird's forewing (and gives the bird yet another of its names – the spurwing). The birds use these spurs against each other when they engage in territorial disputes.

The lily-trotter is just one of many interesting bird species that can be found in our country. Indeed, the sight and sound of wattled jacanas are hallmark features of Trinidadian wetlands. We should seek to eliminate the threats to these birds such as the back-filling and pollution of wetlands so that lily-trotters and all our other wetland species remain with us for a long time to come.

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](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) or visit our website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org).

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