

FEATURES

# Celebrating our endemic birds

By LESTER W DOODNATH

THE CARIBBEAN is a tourist's dream - a network of beautiful islands basking in the sun. And while sun, sea and sand are important elements of Caribbean life, the region can also boast of other natural treasures - including 150 species of birds that cannot be found anywhere else in the world.

The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC) has been involved in the Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival (CEBF) since 2008, making this the seventh year of CEBF activities in Trinidad.

The festival, now in its 14th year, is led by BirdsCaribbean, the largest organisation devoted to wildlife conservation in the Caribbean. The annual festival included Caribbean-wide activities that began on Earth Day ended on International Biodiversity Day on May 22. Over 20 countries participated. The events celebrated the 150 bird species that are found only in the Caribbean, known as endemics, and attract over 80,000 participants and volunteers each year.

"Restore Habitats, Restore Birds" was the theme for this year's Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival. At dozens of events throughout the region, participants of all ages learned how restoring local habitats can benefit the unique birds found only in the Caribbean. Events on many islands included habitat restoration activities, such as clean ups and distribution of native tree seedlings for planting. Events in Trinidad included presentations at TTFNC monthly meetings, school talks, field trips and displays at the Emperor Valley Zoo, the San Antonio Green Market and the Institute of Marine Affairs.

"Over the last several hundred years, natural habitats in the Caribbean have been degraded and destroyed in every



HUNTING the pawi is illegal.

way imaginable," explains Leo Douglas, president of BirdsCaribbean. "Many unique Caribbean birds are now extinct, and many others are threatened. Restoring habitat helps endemic birds and also restores the natural heritage of Caribbean people.

"Birding and wildlife tourism is a huge market that is just starting to make a real impact in the Caribbean," said Lisa Sorenson, who is leading BirdsCaribbean's regional bird tourism project: the Caribbean Birding Trail. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that birding travel spending was US\$15 billion for 2011 in the United States alone, over half of which was spent on food and lodging. "Our endemic birds are a unique asset because they can't be seen anywhere else. Restoring their habitat can bring revenue and jobs to the region, while also protecting nature," Sorenson said.

The goal of the festival over its 14-year history has always been to increase public awareness of the region's exceptionally rich and threatened bird life, using the Caribbean's celebrated endemic birds as flagships of conservation. Festival activities included a diverse array of public events including bird-watching excursions, lectures, seminars, photographic exhibitions, school-based art and costume competitions, church services, media campaigns, and theatrical productions all in recognition of the region's rich bird life, natural heritage, and the interconnectedness of regional habitats to global events.

Festival participants learned that habitat restoration can take many forms. Small-scale actions—like neighbourhood tree-planting or providing birds with backyard food or water sources—can give birds a big boost. Encouraging governments to support larger-scale habitat protection and restoration projects are also essential.

Here in Trinidad and Tobago, raising awareness of our local birds, especially our two endemic species is vital.

The Trinidad piping-guan (Pipile pipile), known locally as the pawi, was at one time Trinidad's only known endemic bird. It is a large turkey-like bird, mainly brownish or greenish black with white markings on the wing coverts, red

legs and blue face and dewlap. Its diet consists of a wide variety of fruits, seeds, flowers and leaves of both local and introduced trees, and water collected in epiphytes is believed to be its main source of water.

The pawi inhabits pristine as well as disturbed forest areas, including abandoned and functional agricultural estates. In the early 20th century, the species was considered common and was known to be found throughout the island. Currently, however, it is believed that the population is restricted to the eastern part of the Northern Range. The status of pawi populations in the Southern and Central Range are uncertain at this point. The decrease in our pawi population has been attributed to hunting pressures and habitat loss. Because of this, the species has been given Critically Endangered status by the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature).

Currently the species is also listed as an Immediate Conservation Priority in the IUCN Cracid Specialist Group Action Plan. It has been given the highest level of local protection, having been designated as an Environmentally Sensitive Species by the Environmental Management Authority



THE TRINIDAD MOTMOT.

Conservation measures in the past have been through both education/awareness drives and research.

The second endemic bird, declared in 2011, is the Trinidad motmot (Momotus bahamensis) which can be found on both islands. The Trinidad motmot is a beautiful, medium-sized bird with a stout, black bill, and long tail feathers with "racquet" tips. The back and wings generally are green, the upper surface of the tail is blue, and the underparts are deeply rufescent. There is a broad, blue line bordering the crown. Motmots eat small insects and lizards, and will also regularly take fruit, sometimes even small birds.

These birds often sit still, and in their dense forest habitat they can be difficult to see, despite their size. However, their whooping calls can be heard in the interior of lowland evergreen forest in Trinidad and they can also be found in old cocoa plantations in the Northern Range. They are abundant in Tobago.

The Trinidad motmot has only recently been classified by scientists

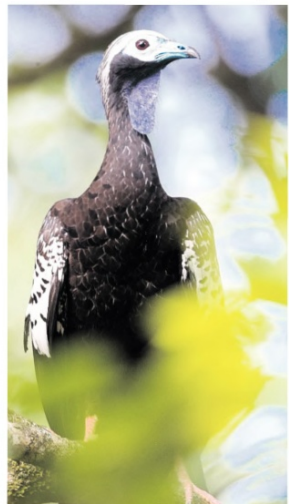
as a separate species. For many years there were five similar groups, all lumped together as the blue-crowned motmot; now these have been separated into five different species. The Trinidad motmot is relatively abundant in Trinidad and Tobago, although studies still have to be carried out to properly ascertain its status since it is now known to be endemic.

The Caribbean's endemic bird species face many threats, and education about our natural environment will be crucial in ensuring that they remain with us for a long time to come. So come let us celebrate our avian treasures. Let us restore habitats so that we can restore the birds!

Visit [www.birdscaribbean.org](http://www.birdscaribbean.org) for more information about the Caribbean's endemic birds. Photos by Cyril Coomansingh and Devan Mulchansingh. For more information on our natural environment contact the T&T Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org), website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org), Facebook and YouTube pages.



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THE Trinidad piping guan.

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