

FEATURES

# Free service from helpful corbeau

By KRIS SOOKDEO

FEW animals in Trinidad are viewed with more scorn than our black vultures. Whether crowding over the carcass of some unfortunate animal on the roadside or searching amongst the endless mounds of garbage at our dump sites, the corbeau has long been a part of Trinidad's history and its culture.

The black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) is a member of the family of New World Vultures and is not closely related to the Old World species that inhabit Europe, Africa and Asia. In fact there are only four species of New World Vulture, three of which have been recorded in Trinidad. The other vulture species present here are the turkey vulture (the common "red headed" vulture) and the king vulture (a beautiful white bird which is a very rare visitor).

Interestingly enough, black vultures are not normally found in Tobago, although several years ago during the filming of *Robinson Crusoe's Island*, several birds were brought over for use in the film and subsequently set free.

Black vultures are found in all habitats in Trinidad ranging from the seashore to our forested hills but the birds show a



CORBEAU'S are an important part of our environment.

preference for the less vegetated lowland areas where finding food is easier. They find their food using their sense of smell to locate carcasses or by using their keen eyesight to find other vultures that have found a meal. Of course, the abundance of organic waste generated by towns and settlements provide an easy meal for the vultures.

When not feeding, the corbeau spends a considerable amount of time resting in trees or soaring high overhead on thermals of warm air. The sight of hundreds of corbeau circling overhead is common throughout the island. Black vultures nest on the ground, choosing shallow depressions on hill-

sides, cliff faces and at the base of forest trees.

The reason for the contempt generally heaped on these vultures, of course, is principally due to their diet.

Black vultures are scavengers and feed primarily off the carcasses of already dead animals including dead mammals, reptiles, amphibians and fish. They will also kill and eat on very young or dying animals and are well known as predators of turtle hatchlings.

The word corbeau is actually French for raven, perhaps indicative of the mixture of contempt and fear that early observers felt towards scavenging vultures.



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Their physical appearance also contributes to the public's scorn. Black vultures are large black birds, the only other colour being the white wing tips visible when birds are in flight. They have hooked beaks and heads that are bare of any feathers. If that was not enough, they have a habit of defecating on their legs!

But these attributes only serve to make the bird more efficient at what it does. Their large wingspan allows them to more easily ride the warm air thermals that they use to gain altitude. Their featherless heads allow for better hygiene considering that they spend a lot of time with their heads in rotting carcasses with their powerful hooked bills. Being cloaked in black feathers and exposed to the sun, vultures must find means to control their internal body temperature and by defecating on their legs, the evapo-

ration of their waste helps to do just that.

The fact is that the corbeau provides an invaluable service in our country, free of charge. By consuming the carcasses of dead and dying animals, the corbeau helps to rid our environment of visually unpleasant sights and potential sources of disease. The species has left its mark elsewhere. The Port-of-Spain waterfront off Wrightson Road was once known as Corbeau Town for the ubiquitous presence of these birds. It is even said that circling vultures helped in the search for the crash site of Mikey Cipriani following his doomed crossing of the Northern Range in 1934.

Black vultures made news in 2013 when several of them were found dying at the Chaguaramas helipad, speculated to be the victims of deliberate poisoning. It should be noted that the vulture is a protected species in our country and it is illegal to kill them as a result. Indeed, while we may not come to love them, we should at the very least respect and be proud of our common corbeau.

For more information on our natural environment contact the TT Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org), or our website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org), Facebook and YouTube pages.

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