

# DOUBTFUL ORIGIN IN SOME BIRD SPECIES RECORDED FROM TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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## Introduction

The science of ornithology operates within certain recognised parameters. All wild species in a particular area are accorded individual status, such as resident, migrant visitor, vagrant, etc. But any species whose origins are suspected to be artificial, e.g. as a result of introduction or the product of captive breeding, usually is treated on a different level from truly wild birds in any study of the area's ornithology.

It is therefore valuable from time to time to examine as critically as possible the status of any species that might reasonably be suspected of dubious origin, so as to prevent these suspicions from being clouded and eventually forgotten with the passing of time. In most cases introduced species do not survive for long, because of ecological constraints or competition with indigenous species; but there are a few examples where such species have been successfully naturalized, so that they have now established sizeable populations that are likely to remain so. These include the House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* and the Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* in North America, and the Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* and the Ruddy Duck *Oxyura jamaicensis* in Britain (though the latter's position in Europe has recently come under threat from conservationists).

We should not be surprised that in nearly every case of successful naturalization serious objections have arisen, as negative impacts on the natural environment come to be recognised. Among the disadvantages are the effects of competition eliminating indigenous species, the over-abundance of the newcomer arising from the lack of natural predators, and the detrimental results suffered by farmers and others when crops, gardens, parks and even buildings are damaged by these birds.

The following account deals separately with more than 30 species that have occurred on Trinidad or Tobago over the last 50 years. The great majority are species known to be kept in captivity by aviculturists, zoos, or just as pets. Sometimes individuals escape, others are deliberately freed, and in a small number of cases this has led to the establishment of a viable feral population, breeding in the wild, but sometimes dependent to a varying extent on humans for survival. Obviously, without a considerable effort it would be impossible to be absolutely certain that a particular individual bird originated from an artificial background; but sometimes such a bird betrays its origins by such signs as unusual tameness or plumage that has faded in captivity or become

abraded by contact with its cage. In other cases we can only surmise, taking into account aspects such as the distance from the bird's natural range, its normal tendency towards vagrancy or not, along with other known examples within the species, and any evidence relating to local captive collections.

Some groups of birds are often kept in captivity, so naturally they form the largest proportion of the following list. They include waterfowl, the parrots and the seed-eaters. Apart from well-known collections of such birds at the Emperor Valley Zoo in Port of Spain and at the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust, a large number of birds are kept in captivity (but rarely encouraged to breed) by individual enthusiasts on Trinidad and Tobago. Currently there exists no mechanism by which birds that escape, or are released into the wild, from the above sources are identified as such, and it seems unlikely that this situation will change. All the more need, therefore, for the ornithological community to be aware of the consequences.

## Annotated List

(\* Denotes a species considered here as not being wild or feral within Trinidad or Tobago).

1. **Ducks.** The avowed aim of the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust at its inception in January 1967, when I served as Honorary Secretary, was to breed in captivity various species of the indigenous wildfowl of the country, most of which were then extremely rare, and through careful re-introduction to restock the local population. Principally this applied to two species of *Dendrocygna*: *D. autumnalis* the Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, and *D. bicolor* the Fulvous Whistling-Duck. Although natural forces may also have played their part, there seems no doubt that the recovery of the former on both islands over the last 30 years is partly attributable to the fact that several hundred *D. autumnalis* ducklings were released into the wild. To a lesser extent this may have happened with *D. bicolor*. The third species, *D. viduata*, the White-faced Whistling-Duck proved harder to breed in captivity, but eventually this was successfully achieved, and may well have been the origin of records such as two of this species seen by myself and Graham White at the Caroni Rice Project on 6 July 1991; further records of four birds were seen by G. White on 8 June 1992 and 18 June 1995 (pers. comm.). Another species commonly bred in captivity, both at the Trust and by many a householder, is the Muscovy Duck *Cairina moschata*. Any record of this species in the wild state has therefore to be

viewed with great caution. Unfortunately, other non-native species of waterfowl have occasionally been bred in captivity, and it is not impossible that individuals emanating from such origins may have found their way to freedom.

2. **Black Vulture** *Coragyps atratus*. Though common throughout Trinidad, this species is rarely found on Tobago. Around 1959 a few were released by those filming "Swiss Family Robinson" on Tobago, remaining at large for several years. I saw three there in 1965, and single birds in April 1967 and August 1968. Isolated birds have continued to be seen up to April 1989 (D. Rooks). Perhaps we should not assume that all these Tobago records are attributable to Walt Disney! The species is commonly found at Toco, from where its keen eyesight and flying ability should not preclude a visit to Tobago. It is in fact surprising that this vulture is not more common on Tobago.

3. **\*Crested Guan** *Penelope purpurascens*. In 1962 I was summoned to the Emperor Valley Zoo to examine a bird brought in from south Trinidad under questionable circumstances. The keepers thought it "might be a Pawi" (*Pipile*), but it turned out to be this much larger species. Although fairly widespread in northern Venezuela, including the Orinoco delta (Meyer de Schauensee & Phelps 1978), it seems highly unlikely that such a heavily-flying bird would be capable of undertaking a flight of several kilometres over the open sea to Trinidad. Guans are often kept captive by Amerindians on the mainland.

4. **Red Jungle-fowl** *Gallus gallus*. Apart from the vast numbers of this species reared in the course of the poultry trade, a small but interesting feral population exists on the island of Little Tobago. The species was introduced on the island by an early resident about 1875, going wild after his death (Ingram 1913). During most of the present century their descendants have flourished on Little Tobago, benefiting from the bananas and other fruits planted for the use of birds-of-paradise. Most individuals have reverted to a wild state, avoiding human contact since they were frequently hunted for food; recently, with the proliferation of tourist traffic, a few birds have become tame, taking advantage of the scraps provided at the landing-place. But the fine plumage and excellent condition of the wild "chickens" that I have seen on the island show that they have adapted well.

5. **\*Crested Bobwhite** *Colinus cristatus*. About 20 years ago I was notified of the occurrence of a banded bird of this species which had been found wandering beside a railway track in central Trinidad. Its behaviour indicated captive origin, but I was never able to discover its previous owner. Quails are sometimes kept in captivity to provide both eggs and meat for the table.

6. **\*Sunbittern** *Eurypyga helias*. Only known on Trinidad from one record at Icacos on 25 April 1985 (TFNC Bulletin),

when a bird was seen at a farm by members of the Club on an expedition to SW Trinidad. The bird's extreme tameness, combined with an injury to one foot, leads me to suspect that this individual is likely to have been captured or wounded; in Venezuela the species is normally quite sedentary and is rarely seen to fly far from its riverside habitat.

7. **Feral Pigeon** *Columba livia*. Probably the best known of all introduced species and common in most countries; it is descended from the Rock Dove, a truly wild bird which frequents cliffs, caves and islands in the more remote regions of the world. Domestication of this species began in the Middle East at least 5000 years ago, giving rise to the enormous variety of plumages found in the domestic bird; whereas the wild bird is uniformly bluish-grey with black wing-bars and a pale rump, with a glossy iridescent neck. Many birds are kept as free-flying pets or used for racing, while a great number of feral birds frequent the large grain-stores on the outskirts of Port of Spain and elsewhere. It seems unlikely that any individuals of this species on Trinidad and Tobago could be truly wild birds.

8. **Parrots**. This family, containing many popular cage-birds, provides the greatest source of controversy concerning the origin of individuals. Apart from the six species known to exist as truly wild birds on Trinidad or Tobago, there are several others whose origins are more obscure and which require individual treatment.

(a) **Blue-and-yellow Macaw** *Ara ararauna*. This magnificent large macaw maintained a precarious foothold in the Nariva Swamp area of Trinidad up to the 1960s. I saw a group of 13 at Caltoo Trace in 1959. There were still a few in the area of Bush-Bush, where F. and M. Nottebohm (1969) estimated the total population to be 15 in early 1968. But a destructive forest fire in 1970 and relentless encroachment by squatters into the Nariva area over the following 25 years have certainly wiped out that small remnant. Yet the species is regularly seen in back-yards, sometimes in a cage, but also as a wing-clipped individual hopping about in semi-freedom. In the 1970s and 1980s C. Turpin had several free-flying pet birds living in his garden at Charlotteville, Tobago. Others were released by R.S.W. Deane and E. Lau at Speyside in a misguided attempt to "re-introduce" these swamp-dwelling macaws into Tobago (where there is no evidence they ever actually lived as wild birds). Clearly there is much illegal traffic in and out of Trinidad, mainly via the Icacos and Cedros area, where fishing boats can easily ply their trade unobserved between Venezuela and Trinidad. During the nine months October 1979 to June 1980 more than 125 of these macaws were exported from Trinidad to the U.S.A. (Roet *et al.* 1981), ostensibly as native-bred birds, even though by then the local population was undoubtedly extinct. With the high prices paid by U.S. traders, it is not surprising that such pressure on the remaining wild population in South America is hard to eradicate. There has been some local movement towards captive breeding and re-introduction into the wild,

but this could only work if a sufficiently large area of appropriate habitat in Nariva Swamp were to be reserved and effectively warded for the macaws, an unlikely prospect.

(b) **\*Scarlet Macaw** *Ara macao*. The few records of this large macaw are mostly unsatisfactory. Two birds reported from Nariva Swamp in October 1934 (Belcher and Smooker 1936) were seen by an un-named observer, not by the authors; other birds were only heard; a group of five were reported from Waller Field by Abbott (Herklots 1961) without details; more recently there have been isolated records of individuals from the SW peninsula. While it is not impossible for some of these records to have involved wild birds, we must again consider the likelihood of escapes from captivity, for the species is commonly kept as a pet and is traded like the previous species through Trinidad (Roet *et al.* 1981).

(c) **\*Red-shouldered Macaw** *Ara nobilis*. There is no confirmed local record of wild birds of this species also known as Hahn's Macaw. Belcher and Smooker (1936), who never personally recorded the locally common *A. manilata*, quote an extremely tenuous sight-record by J.G. Myers in October 1934, and also refer to a specimen of doubtful origin in the British Museum. I was therefore astonished when I was told by R.S.W. Deane during the 1970s of the intention of a British aviculturist, the late L. Hill, to "re-introduce" the species to Trinidad and Tobago by releasing captive-bred birds. Two birds were actually released at Pointe-a-Pierre, but seem not to have survived. A bird seen by G. White at Waterloo on 20 October 1994 was presumed also to be an escaped captive.

(d) **Brown-throated Parakeet** *Aratinga pertinax*. Small groups of this species began to be seen regularly from about 1986 by G. White (1987), mainly in suburban areas of north Trinidad, and in the Caura and Maracas Valleys (R. Neckles *in litt.*) at least up to 1994. The species is common in similar habitats throughout northern Venezuela (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978). Observers have reported these birds to be quite tame, allowing an approach to five metres. While this would normally indicate likely domesticated origin, it does seem in this case to be a characteristic of the species. In addition, this does not seem to be a species commonly kept in captivity and comparatively few are traded (Ridgely 1981, Niles 1981). Therefore, while one cannot rule out the possibility that these records involve feral birds that were originally introduced, I am inclined to consider records of this species within Trinidad to involve genuinely wild birds.

(e) **Green-rumped Parrotlet** *Forpus passerinus*. Although now a common resident of open habitats in Trinidad, the species appears not to have been known before 1916 and is not represented in any collections made before that time. This seems to indicate likely introduction from the mainland, where it is commonly kept as a pet. Introduction from Trinidad to Tobago certainly happened during the 1950s and 1960s, and the species is now widespread on Tobago in suitable habitats, e.g. Mount Irvine. It should be classed as feral, for while it is still frequently caged in both islands, it clearly holds its own in the wild state.

(f) **\*Budgerigar** *Melopsittacus undulatus*. This well-known

small Australian parrot is one of the most widely kept cage-birds in the world. Occasionally escaped individuals are found, but rarely survive for long in the wild.

(g) **\*Sulphur-crested Cockatoo** *Cacatua galerita*. This large white cockatoo is also native to Australia. For some years between 1988 - 1993 an escaped individual was to be seen at Crown Point, Tobago, where it frequently associated with Cattle Egrets.

(h) **Yellow-crowned Parrot** *Amazona ochrocephala*. The precise status in Trinidad of this well-known species (also called Yellow-headed Parrot) is one of the more difficult assessments to make in this study. During the period 1956 to 1976 I searched assiduously for wild individuals without success. The only birds found were living in urban or suburban surroundings in Port of Spain, St Augustine or Pointe-a-Pierre, where captive or tame birds were frequently seen or heard. Occasional reports from the SW peninsula could not be properly substantiated, and on all visits I made to that area I could only find the native *A. amazonica*. Reports were further complicated by the propensity of some local bird-keepers to divide *amazonica* birds into either "Blue-heads" or "Yellow-heads" according to the variable amount of yellow each bird had on its head; but "Yellow-head" did not usually refer to *ochrocephala*, although sometimes it did! In 1995 I found a sizeable population of *ochrocephala* apparently living in a feral state at the U.W.I. campus, St Augustine. There is no doubt that many captive birds are traded through Trinidad, e.g. over 1000 of this species were exported from Trinidad to U.S.A. during the 9-month period October 1979 to June 1980 (Roet *et al.* 1981). It is highly likely that these birds originated in Venezuela, where regulations forbid exportation, probably passing easily if illegally into Trinidad via the SW peninsula. I conclude therefore that whereas feral groups have become established in suburban districts of Trinidad, the species' origins as a wild bird cannot be satisfactorily proven, so long as large numbers of this highly popular pet bird are passing through the territory.

9. **\*Red-billed Toucan** *Ramphastos tucanus*. During the 1960s a bird of this species was brought to the Emperor Valley Zoo in Port of Spain. It was said to have been "found" in south Trinidad by a hunter. Almost certainly it originated in its native country of Venezuela, where it is common in Bolivar (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978), and was probably kept in captivity after being taken from a nest. Toucans make popular pets.

10. **Great Kiskadee** *Pitangus sulphuratus*. Maybe the best-known locally of all Trinidad's birds, even though occasionally confused with the Boat-billed Flycatcher *Megarynchus* or the Tropical Kingbird *Tyrannus melancholicus*. Unfortunately, this very popularity may have led the species to be introduced to Tobago, where R.S.W. Deane and the late E. Lau released birds into the wild at Speyside about 1970. The species has now spread from Speyside as far as Louis d'Or, where D. Rooks has found nesting birds. The suc-

cess of these feral birds can be attributed to the notable aggressiveness of the species in defending its territory, and predictably may lead through competition to the demise of other species among the indigenous avifauna of Tobago. Thoughtless introductions of this nature are to be deplored.

11. **Greater Bird-of-Paradise** *Paradisaea apoda*. The well-known history of this species from its introduction in 1909 from Indonesia to the island of Little Tobago need not be repeated. After the 1963 hurricane a lengthy study on Little Tobago by J.J. Dinsmore (1967) found a maximum of seven individuals, which gradually dwindled, and the last confirmed sighting on the island was in February 1981, though some claims for later occurrence have been made. People with vested interests have attempted to import replacements from Indonesia for this "island zoo", in spite of opposition from the ornithological and conservationist community. It is to be hoped that those in authority will uphold the claims of the natural world against the interests of dollar-orientated entrepreneurship.

12. **\*Red-winged Blackbird** *Agelaius phoeniceus*. A male of this species was found living in Caroni marshes between June 1980 and mid-1981 (French and Manolis 1983). It associated with the native *A. icterocephalus* and established its own territory. Although the species is known to breed as far south as Costa Rica and Cuba, the populations of those areas are not known to migrate south, as do the northern forms breeding in the U.S.A., which reach no further than California and Texas. J. Bond (*in litt.*) pointed out the overwhelming likelihood that this isolated bird was transported to Trinidad by boat. Numerous documentation exists of such instances, and I am inclined to agree that this is the most likely explanation.

13. **\*Troupial** *Icterus icterus*. There are quite a few records of this species occurring on Trinidad over the years (although some of them have turned out to be the migratory *I. galbula*). Because the great majority come from urban/suburban districts, and in view of the great popularity of this species as a cagebird in Venezuela, I am inclined to suspect that all refer to escaped cagebirds. Otherwise, why are there no records from the wilder areas of Trinidad?

14. **Red-breasted Blackbird** *Sturnella militaris*. Fairly widespread in savannas on Trinidad, but not recorded from Tobago till November 1974 (French 1991). Records of several birds continued in the Lowlands area up to about 1990, but have recently ceased (D. Rooks pers. comm.). Bearing in mind that there is no suitable habitat along the entire north coast of Trinidad, one wonders how such a movement of a normally sedentary species could have been initiated. J. Bond (*in litt.*) suggested that there might have been an artificial introduction, but I have never known instances of this species in captivity. However, its apparent disappearance from Tobago does lead me to wonder whether Bond may not

have been correct.

15. **Purple Honeycreeper** *Cyanerpes caeruleus*. A common resident on Trinidad, frequenting forests and adjoining cultivation. In the 1960s I saw a few individuals near Charlotteville, Tobago, but the only records since then have been occasional sightings by David Rooks mainly in the area of Gilpin Trace. Since I know that the late M. Turpin kept this species captive at Charlotteville, where the 1963 hurricane destroyed her aviaries, I assume the above records relate to escaped cage-birds or their descendants. But it is of course possible that there is a small indigenous population of the species living in the Main Ridge forest on Tobago.

16. **Golden-rumped Euphonia** *Euphonia cyanocephala*. This small tanager, locally called "Tête Bleu", seems to be a rare resident, turning up here and there at various times in Trinidad's Northern Range. Although there is no reason to doubt any particular record, one has to beware of assuming that all occurrences are natural, owing to the existence of caged individuals which may well gain a temporary freedom.

17. **\*Trinidad Euphonia** *Euphonia trinitatis*. More commonly found on Trinidad than the previous species. A single record in 1964 from Tobago, where the bird is not known to be indigenous, probably refers to an escaped cage-bird, as such pets are commonly carried by boat between the islands.

18. **Palm Tanager** *Thraupis palmarum*. One of the commonest birds on Trinidad, where it frequents a variety of habitats. First noticed in the Scarborough area of Tobago by D. Rooks and others about 1982, since when it has spread fairly rapidly through suitable areas of the island. Although hardly known as a pet bird, the sudden appearance of this sedentary species leads me again to suspect artificial introduction by some misguided person for an entirely inexplicable motive. It has been suggested that the species may have reached Tobago via a boat travelling from Trinidad, but I have no evidence that it has been observed on board any boat even in harbour.

19. **Finches and Seed-eaters**. One of the most regrettable developments for local ornithology over the last 40 years has been the progressive disappearance of nearly all the members of this group. There is little doubt that this is attributable to the depredations of the pet-trade, combined with the destruction of habitat and general ease of access to more remote areas, which previously served as a refuge and reservoir. As a result, so few wild birds are left of the formerly widespread *Sporophila* / *Oryzoborus* species that nowadays if an observer is lucky enough to find a bird, it is necessary to ask whether it may not be an escape from captivity. (a) **\*Blue-black Grosbeak** *Cyanocopsa cyanooides*. A male of this beautiful species was recorded near Port of Spain in July 1990 (R. Neckles *in litt.*). The circumstances and tameness of the individual indicate artificial origin, especially as

singing males are highly popular and valuable on the mainland.

(b) \***Lesser Seed-Finch** *Oryzoborus angolensis*. On at least two occasions, e.g. in September 1966 and August 1968, I encountered singing males of this species in the area of Gilpin Trace, Tobago. The species was hitherto unknown on Tobago, though still at that time present on Trinidad in small numbers. I regard the most likely explanation of these occurrences to be escapes from captivity, especially as I found the species in similar circumstances on Barbados in 1956.

(c) \***Java Sparrow** *Padda oryzivora*. This popular Asian seed-eater is a commonly kept pet, and this seems the most likely explanation for one seen at Turtle Beach, Tobago on 11 November 1980 (C.E.Keller *in litt*).

(d) \***Common Waxbill** *Estrilda astrild*. Another commonly kept cage-bird, native to Africa south of the Sahara. Small numbers appeared near the Caroni Rice Project as early as 18 September 1990 (G.White pers. comm.), and up to 40 have been seen in the area of Trincity water treatment plant as recently as January 1996 (D. Finch *in litt*). It may now be establishing itself as a feral species.

(e) \***Saffron Finch** *Sicalis flaveola*. Although common locally in western Trinidad, it is not distributed generally throughout the country. The species was introduced to Charlotteville, Tobago by the late M. Turpin, and a few birds escaped after the hurricane, being later seen again in captivity. It is no longer extant on Tobago.

(f) \***Siskin sp.** *Carduelis sp.* A bird of this genus was seen by a British ornithologist at Mount St Benedict on 23 March 1992 (J. Hornbuckle *in litt*). Not known formerly from Trinidad, though the Yellow-bellied Siskin *C. xanthogastra* ranges through northern Venezuela east to Paria peninsula. Possibly a vagrant, but just as likely to have been an escaped cage-bird.

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