

# Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival 2008

*Tundra to Tropics: Connecting Birds, Habitats and People*

## Caribbean Bird and Habitat Fact Sheet

Caribbean habitats are as unique as the islands themselves. Each island differs from the next because it has its own special combination of climate, topography, geology and soils - leading to the development of many Caribbean habitats - and the high numbers of endemic plants and animals that inhabit them.



### Forests

The main types of natural terrestrial forest in the Caribbean include dry forests, moist forests, pine forests and xeric (dry) scrub. Natural forests provide habitat for many rare and endemic species (with the highest numbers in wetter forests), help protect the earth from global warming by absorbing carbon dioxide, help to conserve soil, recycle water and oxygen, and protect the lowlands from flash flooding.

**Threats to forests** include clearing and conversion to agriculture, mining, logging, firewood gathering, making

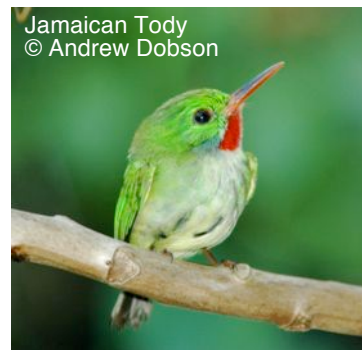
charcoal, grazing, hurricanes and storms, fire, drought and invasive species.

### Species:

#### Endemic species

The Caribbean is known as a “hotspot” for biodiversity because of its immense species richness and the high risk of extinction these species face. There are over 560 species of birds in the Caribbean; 25% are endemic to the region, 56 species are globally threatened with extinction. For example, the Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Dominica, St. Vincent and St.

Lucia all have their own endemic species of **parrots** (*Amazona* spp.) many of which are globally threatened.



**Todies** (*Todus* spp.) belong to a family of birds that is only found in the forests of the Greater Antilles. There are endemic species of tody in Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico. Todies live in forests, woodlands and gardens. They feed on flying insects under leaves, flying up from a perch to snatch them in

the air. Todies have voracious appetites; they may eat up to 40% of their body weight each day. Like their distant relatives, the kingfishers, they nest in deep holes that they excavate in soft soil or rotting wood.



**Black-throated Blue Warbler** (*Dendroica caerulescens*) breeds in North America and winters mainly in the Caribbean, where it can be seen from September to May in Caribbean forests and gardens at all levels. It feeds on insects and small fruits.

This is the most abundant neo-tropical migrant in shade coffee plantations.



**Blackpoll Warbler** (*Dendroica striata*) breeds in boreal forest habitat in North America. During October and November, virtually the entire world population migrates through the Lesser Antilles on its journey to wintering grounds in central South America. It uses a variety of forest, woodland, and scrub habitats during migration.

- In the C19th tropical forests covered more than 20% of the earth's dry land. This had fallen to less than 7% by 2000.
- Some countries in the Caribbean are losing their forests rapidly. Haiti lost 6% of its remaining forest (which were already severely depleted) between 1990 and 2000. St Lucia lost 5%. Cuba increased its forest area slightly in the same period.

## Coastal habitats

The coastal habitats of the Caribbean include: **wetlands** (mangroves, herbaceous wetlands, salt ponds, and swamp forests), **beaches** and **shorelines** (sandy beaches and dunes, rocky pavement and cliffs, cays, coastal woodland and scrub) and **marine** habitats (mudflats and banks, coral reefs, seagrass beds and the open ocean). These habitats are very important for coastal protection from storms and marine productivity. Many species of resident and migratory shorebirds, wading birds, ducks and seabirds depend on them.



Brackish wetland in Anguilla - by Lisa Sorenson

**Threats to coastal habitats** are especially severe and include: destruction of habitat for coastal development—building of hotels and resorts, marinas, golf courses, and industrial sites and ports, and oil exploration; and

degradation of habitat from water pollution, tourism activities, overfishing, oil spills, and global warming (associated with coral bleaching, sea level rise, and increased damage from more frequent and intense hurricanes and storms).

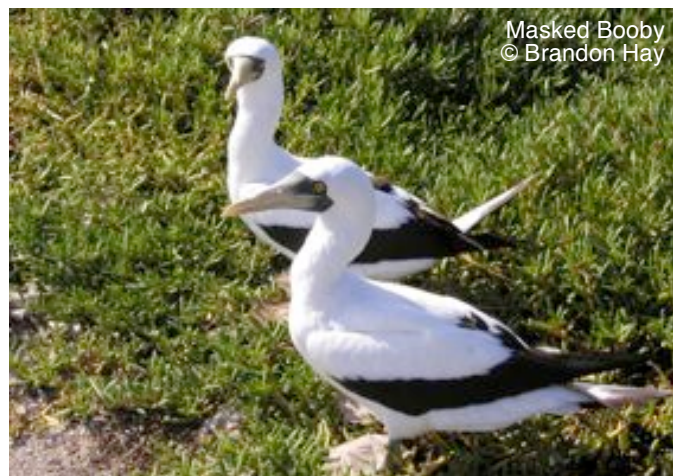
## Species:

**West Indian Whistling-Duck** (*Dendrocygna arborea*) is a Caribbean endemic species and one of the rarest ducks in the Western Hemisphere. After many years of decline, its populations are increasing, as a result of a region-wide public education and awareness program.



West Indian Whistling-Duck © Patricia Bradley

**Masked Booby** (*Sula dactylatra*) is a pan-tropical seabird that nests on offshore islands or cays and feeds on fish far out at sea. Its numbers are declining due to habitat loss. There are only seven known breeding colonies in the Caribbean.



Masked Booby © Brandon Hay

**Ruddy Turnstone** (*Arenaria interpres*) is found along rocky coasts of most islands. It breeds in the Arctic tundra and winters in the south. It gets its name from the way it feeds—turning over stones, flotsam and jetsam as it searches for food along the water's edge.



Ruddy Turnstone © Anthony Levesque

- Mangroves are threatened by development throughout the Caribbean.
- Many seabird nesting islands are less than 3 m above mean sea level and are threatened by sea level rise.
- Only 12 of 74 species of shorebirds that breed in North America are stable or increasing.

## Urban and agricultural habitats

In many of the smaller islands, such as Barbados, very little natural vegetation remains. The original forests, wetlands and grasslands have been converted to make space for sugar cane, pasture, housing, hotels, forest plantations and industry. Many Caribbean birds have adapted to survive these changes. There are many things we can do to increase the suitability of disturbed habitats for birds.



### Enhancing disturbed habitats

The value of disturbed habitats as habitat can be enhanced by good management. Planting or preserving large native trees, scrubs and vines; using as few pesticides and herbicides as possible, maintaining corridors of natural vegetation to link habitats, and avoiding large areas of monoculture are some of the things that can be done to make disturbed habitats more hospitable for native plant and animal communities.

### Species:

**Bananaquit** (*Coereba flaveola*) is a common resident bird throughout the Caribbean islands and Central America. It thrives in disturbed forests and gardens, where it feeds on nectar.



**American Redstart** (*Setophaga ruticilla*) is one of the commonest species in the Caribbean in the winter, when it can be seen almost anywhere there are trees or shrubs, e.g., shade coffee plantations. It breeds in North America, and escapes the cold weather by migrating to the Caribbean.



**Greater Antillean Grackle** (*Quiscalus niger*) and **Carib Grackle** (*Q. lugubris*) are common in gardens throughout the region. They are sociable and omnivorous and may even snatch food from hotel tables.



## *A few reasons why preserving habitat for birds is important*

- **National pride:** Many islands have their own endemic species of birds and are proud of this fact.
- **Neotropical migrants:** Many species of migratory birds spend the winter in or migrate through the islands and are dependent on the food, water and shelter provided in our Caribbean forest, scrub and wetlands habitats for up to 9 months out of the year.
- **Pest control:** Insectivorous birds control pests and reduce the need for pesticides. In Jamaica's famous Blue Mountain coffee plantation, hawks and owls help to control rats and mice.

- **Pollination:** Nectarivorous birds, such as hummingbirds and bananaquits pollinate agricultural crops.
- **Tourism:** Many people visit the Caribbean to see our rare and beautiful endemic birds and unique habitats.
- **Forest maintenance:** Pigeons, such as the White-crowned Pigeon, and doves spread the seeds of important timber trees through the forests.
- **Hunting for food and sport:** Hunting is popular on many islands. It can be sustainable – but only with effective management.
- **Spiritual renewal, enjoyment, pleasure and education:** birds are everywhere and are easy and fun to observe. They provide a wonderful means of connecting to nature and many opportunities for learning.



Dry forest habitat, Guadeloupe © Anthony Levesque



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