

## ENVIRONMENT

# Birds: Migratory lifestyle and role in folklore

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**O**N THE second Saturday of October, International Migratory Bird Day is held each year. Like other similar commemorative celebrations each year, there is a theme.

Folklore is one of my favourite topics so I was happy to learn that the theme for 2009 was "Birds in Culture". Throughout the world birds play a major role in folklore. This article therefore has two main goals, firstly to introduce these birds and their lifestyles and some of the folklore from around the world and Trinidad & Tobago in which they are featured.

The Caribbean is home to 208 resident bird species, 72% of which are found nowhere else in the world. Every year, there are about 350 species of such birds that make the trek between North America to South and Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean. Commonly migratory species fly north in the spring where they breed and raise their young. Therefore, the longer days of the northern summer period means that they have more daylight hours to gather food for their young. Hence they tend to produce larger clutches of eggs. They return to the warmer southern regions during the autumn as the

days get shorter. These regions are usually in the tropics, where the supply of food is relatively stable throughout the year.

The traditional routes that migratory birds take are known as flyways, which take advantage of updrafts and the lack of geographical barriers, such as large expanses of water, by following mountain ranges or coastlines. These routes are learnt by their young when they accompany their parents for the first time on a migratory path.

Not all migrations are long distance ones that span continents, some species make shorter trips to more ideal conditions, for example, the Skylark and Merlin from North America will move south to warmer regions. Also the White-throated Dipper will move to areas of lower altitudes which are warmer and the Lesser Cuckoo which breeds in India will travel to Africa to spend the remainder of the year.

Larger bird species tend to fly in flocks. Some species fly in a V-formation. If they were to fly directly in front of each other, as the bird in front moves forward the bird behind would be subjected to a downward thrust of air termed a downwash. By positioning themselves at the tips of wings of the bird in front, they are subject to the upwash which suspends them and means that they get an extra thrust upwards without flapping their wings and thus saving energy. Flying in this



formation is recorded to save up to 12-20% of energy.

One of the threats these birds face includes predation. Some species of predators are known to coincide their breeding season with that of the migration, such species include the Eleonora Falcon on the Mediterranean islands and the Greater Noctule bat. Other threats include parasites and pathogens which they encounter at stop over sites.

Of course, no celebration about this day would be complete without saying something about this year's theme and the role of birds in various folklore and beliefs.

Ever since Noah released a dove to determine if the floods had receded and it brought back an olive branch indicating that there was dry land, these birds have been taken as a symbol of peace and tranquillity. Its soft cooing call also adds to this image. A white dove flying overhead is taken as a sign of good luck and even dreaming of doves were taken as a sign of good health. These birds were also regarded as sacred by the Philistines and Phoenicians. It was also believed

that the Devil could transform himself into any animals except the dove. However, they were sacrificed by women after having a baby as a form of thanksgiving. Although they were over the centuries held in high reverence, they were also hunted as a source of food.

In Oriental culture, the crane is regarded as a symbol of longevity. The Chinese and Japanese refer to them as "fairy cranes", because of the Chinese legend of a crane that transports an immortal sage or "fairy" to visit the mortal world.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we refer to the Barn Owl as the Jumbie Bird. When it screeches over a house it is believed that a family member will die or sometimes it screeches as it flies and you can tell the direction it is travelling in, which is said to be the direction in which a death is imminent. Africans in Tobago called the nighthawk or nightjar "sansafaduma" and warned that picking up their eggs brought very bad luck. Peacocks are revered by East Indians and roam the countryside throughout the Indian continent.

In Amerindian cultures, birds were revered because they were viewed as the bridge between the earth and sky. One of our national birds, the tiny hummingbird is associated with our Amerindian history and was held sacred by the Chaima Indians who believed that they held the spirits of their

ancestors. They also believed that the Pitch Lake in La Brea in Southwest Trinidad was created as a punishment by their winged god who caused the earth to open up and emit pitch that swallowed up the entire village. Their wrath exhibited in this way, was as a result of the cooking and consumption of hummingbirds during celebrations after victory over a rival tribe. The Taino Indians hunted birds for food and kept parrots for their colourful feathers.

Besides their role in folklore, birds also play a practical role in our lives, for instance the use of pigeons as messengers from as early as 3,000 years ago where they carried the names of the winners of the Olympic Games to neighbouring cities.

Birds also have a role in our ecology such as major top predators in some foodwebs, and they also consume many insect pests. Recreational bird-watching also generates billions of dollars worldwide. Therefore birds are valuable to our environment and to our economy. Their role in our lives is evident in our folklore some stories originating thousands of years ago. These stories are not only stories but serve to conserve these species especially if they are declared sacred like hummingbirds were to the Chaima Indians. Once again, we can see clearly where folklore can be used as a conservation tool throughout the world.