



The Magnificent Toucan- Jewel of the Canopy

By Dmitri Allicock

One of the images conjured up about the rainforest of Guyana is best exemplified by the colorful bill of the Toucan {*Ramphastidae*} and its Jurassic calls of a lost world. Guyana and South America are homes to a diverse range of birds which can be partly attributed to the multitude of fruits which provide sustenance for the large number of fruit eating birds including the toucans. These winged wonders carry a large variety of color combination and adorn the canopy of the rainforest.

The term ***Toucan*** derived from ***Tucano***, a native Brazilian term for the bird and Guyana is home to 9 of the 40 species distributed from Mexico to Paraguay, including the smaller Aracaris and Toucanets. The name Toucan evokes very different images of lush rain forests and large birds with brightly colored bills.



Chestnut-tipped Toucanet



Green Aracari

Some of the Indigenous peoples of South America regard the bird with a more sacred eye; they are traditionally seen as conduits between the worlds of the living and the spirits. The ancient Aztecs believe that the Toucan's beak was created from rainbows. It was said to be the Toucan's reward for being messengers of the gods. The Aztecs would perform rituals worshipping the Toucans, believing that because their beak was created from rainbows and the gods would grant them rain.

The nine species found in Guyana are the **Chestnut-tipped Toucanet** (*Aulacorhynchus derbianus*), **Green Aracari** (*Pteroglossus viridis*), **Black-necked Aracari** (*Pteroglossus aracari*), **Tawny-tufted Toucanet** (*Selenidera nattereri*), **Guianan Toucanet** (*Selenidera culik*), **Channel-billed Toucan** (*Ramphastos vitellinus*), **the Red-billed Toucan** (*Ramphastos tucanus*), **Toco Toucan** (*Ramphastos toco*) and the **Black spotted Barbet** {*Capito Niger*}. Their characteristic yelping call can be heard throughout Guyana's rainforests, from the Atlantic Coast to the interior.

The **Toco Toucan**, the largest and best-known toucan species, is found in semi-open savannahs; locations such as the forest near the village of Aranaputa and along the Rupununi River near [Karanambu Ranch](#), plus areas along many rivers, are amongst the most reliable places to find the bird in Guyana.



Black-necked Aracari



Tawny-tufted Toucanet

The Guianan Toucanet and Green Aracari can often be found along the road while traveling south from the [Iwokrama](#) River Lodge. The toucans are often spotted throughout the country sometimes throwing berries at each other, which are part of courting display, or jostling with their large bills. Toucans are arboreal and typically live in pairs or small flocks. It is rare to find a single bird roaming around for they travel and live in groups of six to twelve adults.

Toucans are sociable, playful and one of the noisiest jungle birds, with a varied repertoire of harsh croaks, raspy yelps, mews, rattles, and other sounds. Some of the larger species sing a series of almost musical calls at dawn. Their calls to one another resemble a cross between a frog's croak and a pig's oink that can be heard as far as a half a mile away. They make a loud rattling, *rat-tat- tat...*, sounding similar to a woodpecker and such a racket of vocalization suggests that they are not trying to remain hidden.

The birds do not migrate and nest in pre-existing tree holes. They are related to the woodpeckers, and inhabit holes in tree trunks in the same manner. A toucan's annual clutch usually consists of two to four white glossy eggs, and the parents share the duties of caring for them which they leave not cushioned in their tree hollow.



Guianan Toucanet



Channel-billed Toucan

The new chicks have no down covering them and they are ready to leave the nest in about 8 weeks. Young toucans are born with small bills that become full size after several months.

The precise use of their enormous bills and most recognizable trait are not fully understood. The notable canoe-shaped bill, can grow up to 20 cm long, can take up to 1/3 of their length and is fairly light since it is made of a spongy, hollow bone covered in keratin. The color of the bill may be black, blue, brown, green, red, white, yellow or a combination of colors.

The bright colors on his bill may help to attract a mate or act as a deterrent to predators, but were it put to the test, it wouldn't stand up very well as a weapon since their beaks are very light weight and lacks the crushing strength like that of the parrot. The bills, however, are quite useful in feeding, as they allow the birds to remain in one spot reaching and skinning the fruits that make up the majority of their diet.

New research shows that the colorful bird uses its massive beak to rapidly radiate away heat, allowing it to chill out in tropical climates or when expending a lot of energy while flying. At its most efficient, the toucan is theoretically capable of shedding 100% of its overall body heat loss through its bill. Toucans also have a narrow, feather-like tongue.



Red-billed Toucan



Toco Toucan {the most popular}

Their large bill is hollow, but still impedes flight which essentially consists of a leap from one tree, a few clumsy wing beats and a carefully planned landing. When they do take flight, they flap their wings vigorously and glide, traveling only short distances, usually from taller to shorter trees.

Toucans have compact bodies, rounded tails that can equal the entire length of the body, short, thick necks and colorful plumage. Because toucans are not long-distance fliers their wings are relatively small, and their legs are strong and short.

Their diet consists mainly of fruit but can extend to insects, reptiles, eggs and even small birds. To feed, the toucan will pick up a whole piece of fruit and tosses it to the back of its beak and swallows it. They use their beaks to pull berries and fruits off of branches while staying safely nestled on strong branches. Their beaks have a serrated edge that gives them a little help with fruit that is tougher to pull free. Many seeds like that of the Too-roo {Turu} *Aenocarpus Baccaba* are swallowed whole while digestive juices do the rest. The toucan is very important to the rainforest and plays an extremely ecological role as [vectors](#) for seed dispersal.



One might well ask how a bird like a toucan manages to sleep at the bottom of a tight-fitting hole. Nimble, the toucan bends double; the beak is twisted round and rests on its back, its tail is folded up on to its breast, its wings wrap round the rest of its body, making a warm, feathery ball. These well known birds are very popular pets, and many are captured to supply demand for this trade and in the U.S can range in prices from \$2000- \$8000 dollars. They are also familiar commercial mascots known for hawking stout, cereal, and other products. {Illustration to the left is the

Black-spotted Barbet

Toucan does have some natural predators including jaguars, owl, eagle, anaconda and also man. Even though toucans are not listed on the endangered species list, they are threatened by humans who capture them for pets, which is a popular trade in some areas. They are also threatened by deforestation.

As pets Toucans are wonderful companions for those who do not feel the need to own a talking bird. Toucans do not speak but they are loveable birds. They enjoy being touched and held closely and Toucan owners are constantly entertained by their silly stunts and active personalities.

These colorful and magnificent birds that nature saw fit to bejewel the canopy of Guyana's lush rainforest add supreme beauty and grandeur, representing some of the most precious and natural treasures that Guyana has to offer.