

JAMAICA'S NATIONAL BIRD: THE DOCTOR BIRD

By: Rochelle Clarke

“Doctor bud a cunny bud, hard bud fe dead.” (The doctor bird is a clever bird which cannot be easily killed).

Description of the Doctor Bird

The doctor bird, also known as the Swallow-tail hummingbird, Streamer-tail, Scissors-tail or Swallow-streamer or by its scientific name, *Trochilus polytmus*, is considered to be one of the most outstanding of the 320 species of hummingbirds (Bond, 1985). The genus is currently split into two separate species, namely, the Red-billed and the Black-billed Streamertail. This bird is indigenous to Jamaica, which means that it lives only in Jamaica.

The hummingbirds have very beautiful feathers and, to top it off, they have no counterpart within the bird population. Hummingbirds produce what is called “iridescent colours” (Arlott, 2010). This means that they show luminous colours which seem to change when they are seen from different angles. This characteristic is only seen among this family. Added to the beautiful feathers that doctor birds have, the mature male birds have a very long tail that streams behind them when they are in flight. It is said that all hummingbirds seem to favour the colour red, which clearly explains their red syrup-filled feeders.

The Origin of the Name ‘Doctor Bird’ or ‘Doctor Hummingbird’

According to Senior (2003), the origin of the name ‘doctor bird’ is not entirely known or understood. Many researchers have stated and speculated that the name was given due to the black crest and tails of the bird which resemble the top hat and long-tail coat worn by doctors centuries ago (Senior, 2003, p. 238). Another school of thought is that the name developed because of the way in which the birds lance flowers with their bills when they are extracting nectar, which is their main source of food, in addition to spiders and other insects which they eat.

While the exact reason for the name doctor bird is unclear, it is known as a fact that the hummingbird species are so called because of their ability to fly backwards while producing a humming sound from the rapid fluttering of their wings.

Habitats of the Doctor Bird

The Red-billed hummingbird can be found in a wide variety of Jamaican habitats, ranging from sea level to the highest mountains. These types of birds are most abundant in closed forests but are also known to visit plantations, parks, and gardens which have both suitable flowers and hummingbird feeders.

The Black-billed hummingbirds, on the other hand, are found only on the eastern section of the island, particularly in the humid parts of the John Crow Mountains. The Black-billed hummingbird overlaps with the Red-billed Streamertails between the Blue Mountain range and the John Crow Mountains where the two species often interbreed.

Superstition About the Doctor bird

Frederick Cassidy, Jamaican-born linguist and lexicographer, in his study of the doctor bird, notes that it is an object of superstition. Cassidy outlines that the Arawaks, (one of the early settlers on the island), had spread the belief that the bird had magical powers and, as such, they called it the 'God-bird' as they believed that it was the reincarnation of dead souls (Daniels, 2012). This viewpoint is manifested in a folk song, the first line of which appears at the beginning of this article. In most rural areas in Jamaica, many believe that if one kills a doctor bird it will bring bad fortune or what Jamaicans term as 'bad luck'.

Importance to Jamaican National Heritage

The unique hummingbirds are a source of national pride. It is the only bird covered with shimmering black and green feathers. It is one of the most spectacular among the hummingbird species and is only found in Jamaica.

The doctor bird is the national bird of Jamaica and a national symbol of the country. So important is this bird to Jamaican culture and society that it is featured on government documents, such as the passport and driver's licence, and on special bank notes produced by the Bank of Jamaica. It is also featured on documents relating to civic events and important national observances.

The doctor bird is not only revered by Jamaicans. It is also a favourite attraction of visitors to the island who take the opportunity to get a close-up view of the birds at the Rockland's Bird Sanctuary and Feeding Station, located south of Montego Bay (Hoilett, 2014).



The Doctor Bird

Source: <https://abcbirds.org/meet-the-streamertail/>

Bibliography

Arlott, N. (2010). *Birds of the West Indies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bond, J. (1985). *Birds of the West Indies*. London, England: Collins

Daniels, D. (2012). Streamertails – the Jamaican Hummingbirds. Retrieved from:
<https://www.beautyofbirds.com/streamertailhummingbirds.html>

Hoilett, A. (2014). *Trochilus Polytmus Red-Billed Streamertail*. Retrieved from:
https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Trochilus_polytmus/

<https://abcbirds.org/meet-the-streamertail/>

Senior, O. (2003). *The encyclopedia of Jamaican heritage*. St. Andrew, Jamaica: Twin Guinep Publishers.

Smith, R. W. (1968). Jamaica's own birds. *Jamaica Journal*, 2(4), 18-21.