

# TOP 10



## Native garden birds on Curaçao



Michelle Pors- da Costa Gomez





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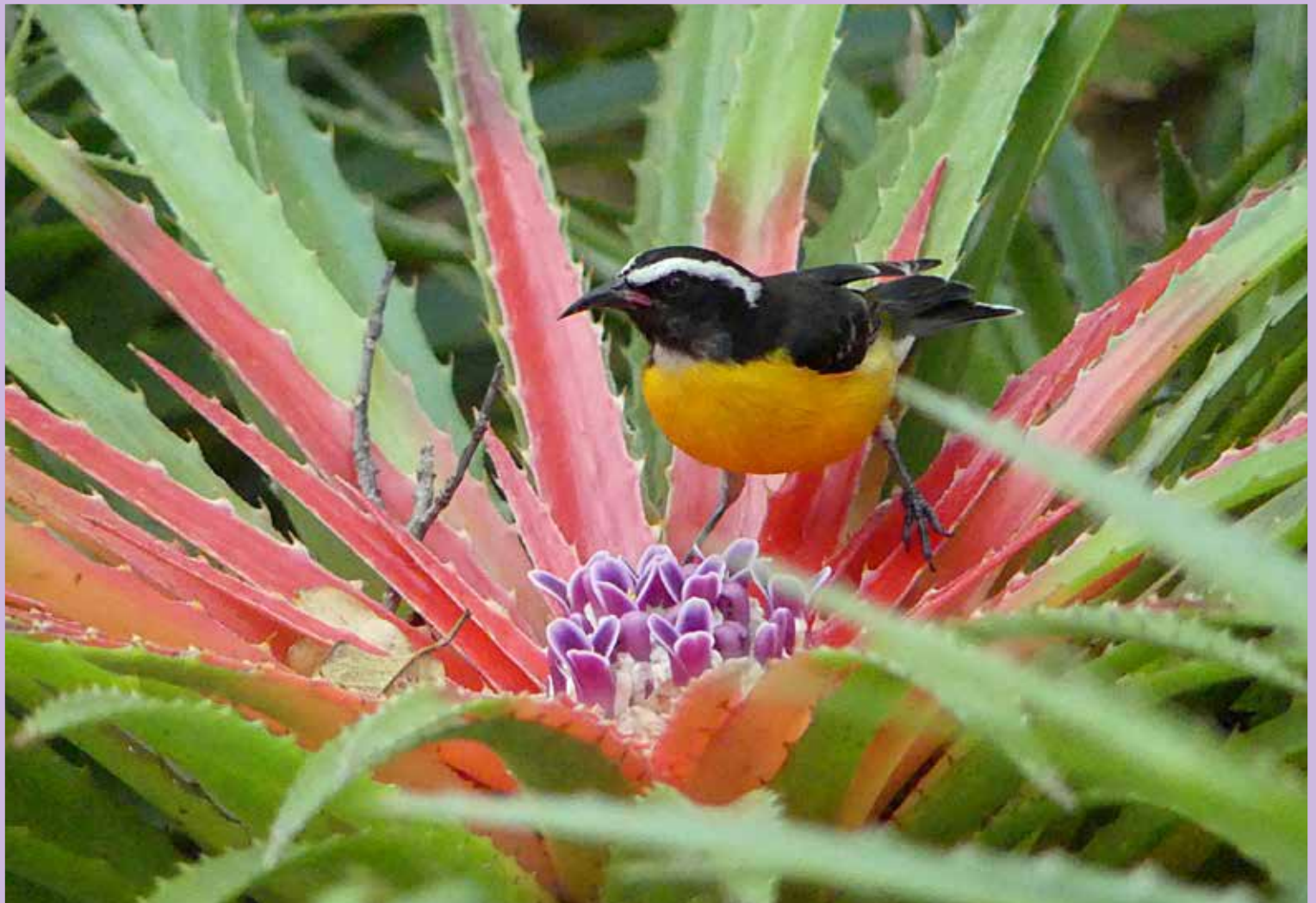
## Native garden birds on Curaçao

Text and photos: Michelle Pors- da Costa Gomez

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Museo di Historia Natural di Kòrsou  
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Female

Male



# 1. Black-faced Grassquit

Dutch: Maskergrondvink

Papiamentu: Mòfi

Scientific: *Tiaris bicolor*

The Mòfi, as the animal is called in Papiamentu, is a small bird of about 10 centimeters in size, which belongs to the seed eaters. The feathers of the Mòfi are greenish brown in color and vary per individual. It is one of the few species of birds on the island, in which it is fairly clear to see whether it is a female or male animal. The males have a dark head and are overall darker in color with olive-green tones and differ from the females, which are lighter and grayer in color.

In the past, these birds were generally widespread throughout the island and were also found regularly in urban areas where they search for seeds, including cactus seed, in gardens. These days, the animals have become a lot rarer and the impression is that it is mainly due to the introduction of the invasive Saffron Finch, that numbers are declining. Saffron finches not only eat the same food, but are more aggressive in their search for food, and in addition, these birds live in groups consisting of several adult animals and a large number of young. The Mòfis live in smaller groups that often cannot cope with the invasion of the large groups of Saffron finches.





## 2. Brown-throated parakeet

Dutch: Maisparkiet

Papiamentu: Prikichi

Scientific: *Eupsittula pertinax pertinax*

The Prikichi di Kòrsou is a bird, which is known as an endemic subspecies for our island. Aruba and Bonaire each have their own endemic subspecies and this is especially evident in the appearance of the animals. While the Bonairean parakeets have an almost entirely orange-yellow head, the Aruban subspecies has practically no yellow on the head. The Curaçaoan subspecies has a yellow-orange mask. With enough time these subspecies could have developed into endemic species specific to each particular island. Mankind, however, has put a stop to this by the age-old desire to keep birds as pets, subsequently causing Aruban and Bonairean subspecies to come to Curacao and be released into the wild, mixing with the local subspecies. The same practice happened on sister islands Aruba and Bonaire.

The prikichi eats everything. Fruits and flowers of the columnar cacti, fruits in gardens and they love the fruits of the Machineel tree and the pods of the wabi or Acacia.

The animals mainly nest in termite nests, where the high temperature inside, caused by the insects' activity incubates the eggs. In certain areas, they also breed in small burrows in calcareous or other geological formations.



### 3. Rufous-collared Sparrow

Dutch: Andesmus / Roodkraaggors

Papiamentu: Chonchorogai

Scientific: *Zonotrichia capensis*

The Chonchorogai is a frequently seen guest in the garden and also on beaches, open restaurants and terraces. Hopping around, while putting up its crest, looking for crumbs, seeds or insects, to feed on.

The most striking feature of the animal is the crest, seen in both males and females, but this crest isn't always up. In addition, the animals have a rusty brown collar with black patches at the neck, which are reminiscent of a bow tie.

The animals live in different habitats and enjoy having shrubs or trees nearby, from which they sing a melodious tune. The birds also sing at night, making them the only bird species on the islands singing during the evening hours (besides the screaming of the barn owls and nightjars).

The Chonchorogai is a small bird that does not exceed 15 centimeters. In the wild the animal shows a striking behavior. Using their feet, the animals turn the leaves on the ground upside down in search of small insects, which hide below.

The Chonchorogai is a breeding bird for Curacao, does not occur on Bonaire and is probably extinct on Aruba.



## 4. Bananaquit

Dutch: Suikerdiefje

Papiamento: Barika Hel

Scientific: *Coereba flaveola*

These birds are very common on Curaçao, and are easily identified by the yellow belly, black jacket and shrill chirping. The white stripe above the eye marks the animal and with it, it seems to be looking angry permanently. Taking a picture of a not 'angry looking' Barika hel (as the animal is called in Papiamento), is almost impossible. The bird species has learned a wide variety of tricks for an easier life on the island. One of the tricks concerns the construction of the nest. The bird finds it a lot easier to build a nest in a lamp or in a plant near people and their structures. It's a lot safer than building a nest in the mondi, and the construction materials are easy to obtain, in the form of pieces of mop, fluff and sometimes even paper. Building the nest is a job of the male, who makes every effort to please his female. But there only has to be something wrong with nest, in regards to the location or the interior, and the female takes the nest completely down, on which the male has to start all over again.

Incidentally, the Barika Hel is mainly an insect eater and sweets are secondary in their daily menu. This does not mean that these animals don't have a sweet tooth, and that is why they are so easily attracted to the garden with white sugar, which many people put out in large numbers. This is however not a healthy practice for these birds and in some areas this may lead to overfeeding with the sugar, causing obesity, diabetes-like symptoms and even growth defects. We always advise, if feeding sugar, not to do this more often than once or twice every 2 weeks. It is even better to stop feeding it and only feed overripe fruits like bananas, oranges, mango and the like. Not only do they feed on the more nutritional fruit juices, the fruits also attract fruit flies, which is part of their healthy diet.



## 5. White-tipped Dove

Dutch: Verraux' Duif

Papiamentu: Ala Duru

Scientific: *Leptotila verreauxi*

A pigeon which can most often be seen walking through the garden or the mondi, is the Ala duru or White-tipped Dove. The pigeons, which can grow to about 29 centimeters in length, 'stroll' at ease along their route, occasionally pausing to pick up food, in the form of seeds and other edible vegetable components, sometimes including pieces of fruit.

Those who have these birds in the garden and study them every day will soon discover that the animals have a fixed walking route, which they follow both in the morning and in the afternoon. In comparison to the other pigeons on our island, the Ala duru is fairly light in color. Striking are the red legs and black beak and the yellow eyes with a blue eye ring around it. In addition, they also have white on the tail tips. These pigeons can be identified in the air by the flapping of their wings, because they are clearly audible, hence the name Ala duru (hard wings). Another behavior they often exhibit is a little twitching of the tail and head back and forth.

The nest of these birds consists of nothing but a few twigs that are haphazardly placed on a tree branch and where 2 eggs are usually laid. The Ala duru breeds on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao.

On the picture a female with her chick.





## 6. Yellow Oriole

Dutch: Gele Troepiaal

Papiamentu: Trupial kachó (Bonaire/Curaçao) / Gonzalito (Aruba)

Scientific: *Icterus nigrogularis curasoensis*

The 21 centimeter long Yellow Oriole is often referred to as ‘the other trupial’, or “the trupial which is not so beautiful orange’, which of course doesn’t give the animal credit. Because even though the animal is not as brightly orange as the ‘ordinary’ trupial, whoever takes a closer look will notice quickly that these birds have their own beauty and can not be compared in any way with the orange trupial.

The Yellow Oriole breeds on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao and makes complex nests, which look like elongated bags of grass and twigs that are often attached to a thin twig on a high tree and in which the eggs and young are cradled by the wind.

The Yellow Oriole’s menu consists mainly of insects such as beetles, grasshoppers and flies. But if a ripe fruit can be found, such as ripe bananas on a feeding table, the animal will enjoy it. They also favor other sweet fruits in nature such as cactus fruits, sapotilla or mispel, mangoes, cactus fruits, West Indian cherry and oba when they are available. But seed is also on the menu of these birds, both seed from cactus fruits and bird seed offered on feeding tables, and they will also eat a piece of bread sometimes if available.



## 7. Tropical Mockingbird

Dutch: Caribische Spotlijster

Papiamentu: Chuchubi

Scientific: *Mimus gilvus*

The Tropical mockingbird, or Chuchubi as the bird is locally called, is best known on the island for the singing concerts that are performed especially at sunrise and sunset.

The bird is gray in color and is often labeled dull, compared to the bright colors of the troupial. But whoever gives the birds a worthy extra look, will see that these birds are not just gray but have different shades between white, gray and black. As omnivorous birds, the Chuchubi will eat anything from fruit to animal prey and will end up eating from the dog food bowl just as well as from the overripe bananas put outdoors for birds.

The animals can be seen everywhere, both in gardens and in the mondi where it seems as if there is hardly any food. Due to the omnivorous character of the animals, they survive on ants, caterpillars and sometimes also grab the eggs of other birds.

The animal is often confused with the Gray Kingbird.



## 8. (Venezuelan) Troupial

Dutch: Oranje Troepiaal

Papiamentu: Trupial

Scientific: *Icterus icterus*

The orange Troupial (sometimes called the Venezuelan Troupial) is one of the most striking birds in Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao and is therefore featured on many a brochure, leaflet and advertisement to encourage holidaymakers to come to the islands. The bright orange colors in contrast with the tight black 'jacket' and the striking white stripe on the wings and the black mask make the birds stand out from the gray-green of the natural vegetation. The blue skin around the yellow eye can give the animal a severe appearance.

The Troupial is a real omnivore. It feeds on fruit, seed, insects as well as eggs and young birds of other birds. And if you happen to have a package of meat thawing at an open window, you shouldn't be surprised if holes are pierced in it with the sharp beak to get to the meat.

Troupials are known for their aggressive attitude when breeding. They sometimes use the nests of the Yellow Oriole as well as other birds' nests as a breeding location, as long as the eggs can be laid in a sheltered place. If building their own nest, a place between the arms of columnar cacti is preferred, or between the spiny date tree leaves. The Troupial can reach 25 centimeters in length and is probably the most photographed bird on Curaçao.



## 9. Bare-eyed Pigeon

Dutch: Naaktoogduif

Papiamentu: Ala blanka (Palomba di mondi on Bonaire)

Scientific: *Patagioenas corensis*

The most well known local pigeon species on the island is the Ala blanka or Bare-eyed Pigeon, which can now be seen in large numbers in almost all neighborhoods.

Until about 25 years ago, the numbers of this species on the island were alarmingly low. The animals preferred to stay in wild location with minimum interaction with humans. However, there was a change in the shy behavior, and as a result the numbers of these birds soared, entering urban areas on the island in search of food and the birds thereby also adjusted the food choice. In various places on the island, the animals are now even considered to be a pest. Those who regularly admire sunsets will wonder what the large groups of flying birds are, which are on the move. In 9 out of 10 cases you are looking at a flock of Bare-eyed Pigeons.

The most striking feature of the Ala blanka is the black ring around the eye, which is not always clearly visible in young animals. In addition, of course, the white stripes on both wings, which are especially visible in flight, but are also visible in a sitting position. These animals also sometimes have slightly iridescent neck feathers, which light up when the sunlight falls directly on them. The animals are large with a length of 34 centimeters and, in addition to seeds, they also eat fruits and even fries when they are around snack bars or junk food restaurants. The Ala blanka breeds on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao and according to the latest literature there is a lot of migration between the islands.



Mannetje



Vrouwtje



## 10. Blue-tailed Emerald

Dutch: Blauwstaartsmaragdkolibrie

Papiamentu: Blenchi

Scientific: *Chlorostilbon mellisugus*

Anyone who has a plant in the garden on Curaçao with bright orange, red, purple or yellow flowers might see a swift iridescent green creature whizzing by, hanging around for a moment and disappearing as quickly as he or she, arrived. With a bit of luck and a good bunch of flowers, you have the chance to follow the animal a bit longer and maybe even see it sitting on a branch to rest. And the good observer immediately sees that the same bunch of flowers is visited by different individuals of this Blue-tailed Emerald hummingbird.

The difference between males and females can easily be seen in hummingbirds. The male Blue-tailed Emerald is a real emerald among the birds on the islands, deep green in color with a blue haze that glows in the sunlight. The males are all green in color and real fighters who tolerate no competition in their territory, which can often span multiple gardens. The females can also be quite aggressive towards each other and towards other bird species. They are less brilliant green on the top and greyish in color on the belly. It is for good reason that the women are less noticeable. Namely, it is the females who are entirely responsible for building the nests, laying and hatching the eggs and taking care of the young. If you stand out as a mother, chances are that your litter will be looted by a hungry troupial or other predator. These hummingbirds might be small, 8 centimeters long at most, but the size is not equivalent to the courage of the animals. It is not uncommon for angry female hummingbirds to actively chase away potential predators as large as Crested Caracara's.



## **COLOFON**

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**Text and photos: Michelle Pors- da Costa Gomez**

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With more than 60 species of breeding birds on the island of Curaçao, several bird species can be found in gardens on the island. Drawn to gardens to find moisture and food, offered by humankind. These are the Top 10 native garden birds which can be found in general gardens. In no way do they depict the complete picture of garden bird variety, but give some insight in those which can generally be found.

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