

Tobago



**Real humdinger**  
The ruby topaz is one of six species of hummingbird that can be seen on Tobago



# THE FLIGHT FANTASTIC

You don't have to be a twitcher to fall for the bountiful birds of Tobago, or for their jungly, rugged and unspoilt Caribbean island home

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**Bevy of birds**  
From potoos to blue-crowned motmots, Tobago is alive with avian species; Little Tobago Island (right, behind Goat Island) is the place for frigatebirds



**W**

hile I heard the din of the whole forest orchestra, Newton heard every instrument. We both stood amid the drapery of noisy green: to me it was a compound call of Caribbean nature; for Tobago's best

birder, each chirp arrived as a separate wave, distinct and discernible from the next. My eyes were no better. I caught blurred flurries; for Newton, every feather froze in midair, every wing beat in slo-mo high definition.

"That's a motmot. See there? A tropical kingbird. And to the left, look, a rufous-tailed jacamar."

I tried to follow his words with my binoculars but the avian salvo was too thick and fast. No sooner had I focused on a blue-crowned motmot than an oropendola swooped by. I'd search for that, but then a white-necked jacobin would cock its iridescent head. "You might see 60, 65 different types of birds today," Newton had prophesied when we'd set out that morning. At this rate of spotting, we'd be done by lunch.

Tobago, along with big-sister Trinidad, is the birding capital of the Caribbean. The small twin-island nation, loitering so close to the Venezuelan coast it's practically part of South America, is home to more than 430 species. While you'll see fewer bird types on Tobago (more like 200), the laidback, less-developed little sis is the more spectacular backdrop.

Now, I'm no avian expert. But I do have a heart unflinchingly warmed by the sight of a bird in flight (especially ones in pretty colours). I also believe birds are great guides, leading you into wild and beautiful places. Add this to a rumour that Tobago remains one of the most 'authentic' islands in the Caribbean, and I was sold.

### Avian A-Team

My first bird wasn't much of a boast. The cockerel provided a rude alarm call, but roused me for my *buljol* (salt cod) breakfast and early start with Newton George. For avid twitchers, Newton is the first species on any Tobago ticklist. His father was once caretaker of Little Tobago, an uninhabited seabird sanctuary off the north of the main island; a young Newton shadowed dad, and soaked it all up. Subsequently, after over two decades working for the Trinidad & Tobago Forestry Department, there isn't much Newton doesn't know about the lay of his country's land.

As a ranger, he was tasked with protecting the Main Ridge Forest Reserve. Spanning the leafy backbone of the island, the reserve was established in 1776 by the British (who ruled at the time), making it the world's oldest legally protected forest. And it's where Newton and I were headed for my intro to wild Tobago. Until we got waylaid.

Newton detoured into the car park at Argyle Falls. On a normal day we might have taken the short trail leading to the pretty stepped cascade, the island's highest. However, we had other business. "There's a common potoo around here," Newton said, scanning the trees. "It has three different perches; I know two."

And, yes, there it was – a brilliantly bug-eyed bird, sitting motionless on a barren stump. "It always picks a dead bit of branch to sit on so it looks like part of the tree," Newton explained. ▶



Previous spread: Nature Picture Library; This spread: Nature Picture Library; Tobago: Tourism; Albany; Sarah Butler

‘Tobago doesn’t do five-star slick. Many travellers talk of the island’s rustic Caribbeaness; rougher around the edges maybe, but all the better for it’



Sea in style  
Castara Bay retains  
a laid-back, local feel  
– helping fishermen  
haul in their nets is  
encouraged

## Tobago

◀ Though he'd seen this potoo a hundred (thousand?) times before, he looked as chuffed as if it was his first.

We left the potoo to its statue-ing, continuing up the Roxborough-Parlatuvier Road, which slices through Tobago's tree-cloaked highlands. We were advancing ever deeper into a bowl of greens, a tropical smear of mora, teak, mahogany, pine and palms, of flaming-red immortelles, bromeliads and creepers. But again, Newton was soon distracted – something had caught his ever-watchful eye.

We jumped out of the van just as a pair of orange-winged parrots gave us a fly-by. They mate for life, Newton said, before using his little green laser to point out the hiding place of a golden-olive woodpecker, which was making its loud, signature 'greep'.

In this fashion, we inched slowly up the road. We'd spot a couple of birds, jump back in the van and drive on with the doors slid open, all the better to be able to quickly jump out again. It felt less like birdwatching, more like being in the A-Team. And we hadn't even made it into the reserve yet.

"Look, right there!" Newton hit the brakes. The rarest of Tobago's six species of hummingbird, the white-tailed sabrewing, was *not* playing hard to get – it was brazenly insect-snacking right by the

tarmac. Glittering green, with a blue-violet throat, its wings flapped so fast as to be virtually invisible; it was a tiny, shiny body suspended in a murmuring blur. "A hummingbird might be behind my back," said Newton, "and I can tell which species it is by the sound of its wingbeat."

### Wings, wanders and Wellingtons

Only one road dissects the Main Ridge Reserve, but several trails plunge in. Most popular is the Gilpin Trace but, said Newton, the Spring Trail would be quieter, and better for birds. So, we headed there, stopping briefly to see a man at a truck about some wellies – you can hire a pair for a few TT dollars, to help combat the mud.

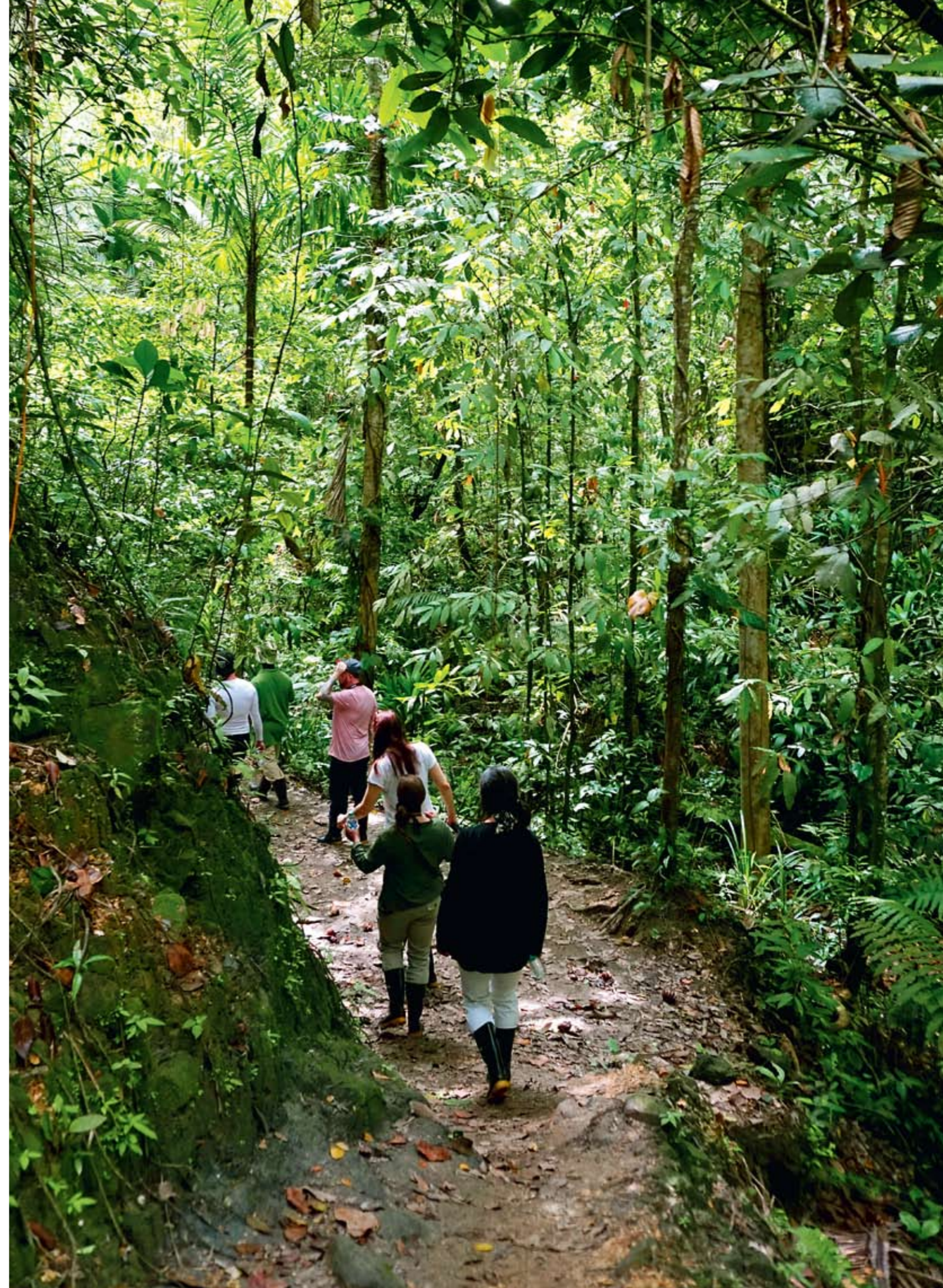
Dressed ready for Glastonbury, we set off on the short loop, a chocolatey squelch of leaf litter and palm husks wending via sturdy buttresses and every hue of green. We paused at a trapdoor spider's burrow, where Newton used a twig to carefully lift its ingenious kettle-spout lid, hinged by silks. And we watched a dual carriageway of leafcutter ants charging along the soil. However, despite being in the reserve proper, we saw fewer birds. There was an olivaceous woodcreeper, scurrying up a tree trunk in its quest for insects, and a rufous-breasted wren, which sang us a little ditty. But, largely, the ▶

## 'Purple gallinules waded amid a pond of waterlilies while one tree heaved with mohicaned egrets and a gang of green iguanas'

**Fine forest**  
The lush Main Ridge Forest Reserve conceals a wealth of birds – from exotic species to pretty pigeons



Previous spread: Dreamstime; This spread: Corbis; Tobago Tourism





**Looking good**  
The male barred antshrike is a handsome fellow

◀ foliage hid the birds, then a torrent of rain sent them into deeper hiding. Newton fashioned an umbrella from a palm frond, and we continued through the squidge, reemerging onto the road as the downpour came to a stop. This was good timing: several birds emerged too, in order to dry their wings.

“Look! Wow!” Newton urged, excitedly. “A yellow-legged thrush – usually very shy!” I was thrilled to be in this lush new world, with its technicolour inhabitants; though Newton had seen it all before, he seemed to feel exactly the same.

However, you don’t need to give a hoot about birds to enjoy a jaunt over to mile-long Little Tobago. That afternoon, we took a short boat trip there from sleepy Speyside, motoring over the world’s biggest brain corals, and via a private island rumoured to have been owned by Ian Fleming (it wasn’t, but why let the truth spoil a good story?). There was also the chance to jump overboard for a swim en route, which I did, snorkelling over those mighty brains, a flurry of reef fish and a large green turtle.

Little Tobago is also known as Bird of Paradise Island – in 1909 a colony of greater birds of paradise was introduced here, in an effort to save them from the plume trade in Papua New Guinea. By 1963, in part due to devastating Hurricane Flora, the refugees had become extinct. Still, the island remains a sanctuary for many other species.

Having docked at the jetty, I followed Newton up a winding path, through dense foliage. He pointed out the medicinal candle bush, virgin white orchids and handy silver palm – useful for everything from parcelling up fish to weaving hats. Oropendolas were being noisy in the trees and feral chickens peck-pecked amid the anthurium. We were heading for Newton’s favourite lookout, to view birds at their most piratical.

From our vantage, we found raucous skies. Everywhere squadrons of magnificent frigatebirds were air-bombing red-billed tropicbirds, terrorising them into releasing the fish in their beaks. It was celestial carnage, and many of the tropics were flying wounded, with only one elegant tail feather where there should have been two. But, despite this horror, I didn’t see a single frigate secure its hoped-for free meal.

## Nature abundant

Part of Tobago’s appeal to anyone even remotely into nature is that there are birds almost everywhere. On my second day of exploration with Newton, we even crept up on some white-checked pintail ducks at the unpromising sounding Sewage Ponds. And when we pulled into the grounds of Tobago Plantation – a former cocoa farm, now

a golf course and hotel – we were barely off the highway before the spotting began. Anhingas eating fish; great egrets in flight; tri-coloured herons, abundant as baubles on a Christmas tree. A Jenny jump-up was going bananas, doing its stuck-on-a-trampoline-like display on a dead tree. The lagoon’s caiman looked unimpressed.

The plantation had all sorts of interesting nooks and crannies, to which the golfers were likely oblivious. Purple gallinules waded amid a pond of waterlilies. One particular tree heaved with mohican egrets and a gang of green iguanas. There was also a boardwalk through a stand of spindly mangroves, their fingery roots encasing us like prison bars; the mangrove cuckoo was elusive in its namesake home, though we saw one later, just by the road.

My favourite bird, though, was the barred antshrike. Not the flashiest thing we saw; rather, a little speckled fellow with a black quiff. We’d seen one in the forest reserve, and I spied – and identified – one here. I felt both unfeasibly satisfied at my mini success and delighted to see this handsome chap hopping in the trees.

I didn’t need Newton’s help to spot the hummingbirds at Adventure Ecovillas later that day. This organic farm and nature reserve at Arnos Vale is a-buzz with hummers: copper-rumped, white-necked jacobin, rufous-breasted hermit, the exquisite ruby topaz. Tens, even hundreds, of them zipped around the sugar-water feeders. They flew so fast I felt drunk – my vision blurred, unable to focus on their details.

I spent the night at the farm, in one of its two raised, rustic, wooden villas, looking out over mango, papaya, guava and cherry trees – all of which I was allowed to pick. I returned to the sugar feeders just after dark to find the night shift had clocked in: the hummingbirds were gone, replaced by bats – just as fast, but with a more leathery flap.

## Living for the lime

Tobago has an understated tourism industry. Most visitors who come here stay in southwesterly Crown Point, home to Pigeon Point’s idyllic – if a little crowded – sands. Even there, though, Tobago doesn’t do five-star slick. Many travellers I spoke to talked glowingly of the island’s rustic Caribbeaness; rougher around the edges maybe, but all the better for it. As I explored I felt this vibe: goats grazed on the verges, bright drive-up shacks sold piles of fresh fruit, and there was an absence of big brands – instead, roadside ads touted Dave & Daughter’s Hardware or the upcoming steel pan ‘Panorama’ contest.

Castara is a good example. This small village on the north coast has a lovely sandy bay, and fine swimming and snorkelling, but there’s not a high-rise or tat-shop in sight. This is just how Steve and Sue Felgate like it. They built Castara Retreats here, a cluster of stylish wooden lodges clinging to the hillside behind, and ensure that their enterprise benefits rather than blights the community. They want to link guests with the village, encouraging them to pop into Cheno’s coffeeshop, buy coconut cakes from the ladies at the bakery or help the fishermen haul in their *seine* nets; thanks to patronage from the hotel, locals have set up everything from laundry businesses to tour companies. Over a passionfruit mojito, Steve told me, “We provide the money to stimulate the economy; the local people provide the happiness and the lime.”

The lime? Steve tried to explain: it’s chewing the fat, hanging out, having deep conversations, drinks... its one of those untranslatable phrases that just, well, is.

I left Steve and walked to my room, a sort-of treehouse perched amid fragrant exotics. I listened as I walked – a certain Newton George once scoured Castara’s gardens and spotted 70 different bird species here. I was on my own, but maybe the grackles and tanagers, the bananaquits and parrotlets – or even my mate, the barred antshrike – would join me for a final lime. 🍋