



from
the field . . .

by Jack Clinton-Eitniear
McAllen, Texas

Toucans of Northern Central America

The hottest place in Latin America has got to be Merida, Yucatan in late June. I normally would have taken a more southernly route back to the United States but was to meet my wife in Merida for her first real taste of Mexico. Traveling west through the Yucatan peninsula we soon crossed the Rio Usumacinta, the last of the truly wild rivers in Northern Central America. Soon we were at our destination, the ruins of Palenque, Chiapas. After walking throughout the ruins area and taking the normal tourist type pictures we decided that the hot summer sun was getting the best of us and that we best leave and seek a friendly iced glass of cola. As soon as we were at the last leg of the exit path a strange croaking sound vibrated from the forest above the ruins. Only one call was needed to spark "it's a keel-billed toucan!!" We scoured the treetops for nearly ten minutes before discovering the location of this big beaked bird. It was the first toucan that Mary has seen in the wild and although I have seen countless others we both stood, sweat dripping down our foreheads, watching the comical antics of this wonder of the bird world.

The Keel-billed Toucan (*Ramphastos sulfuratus*) can be found in reasonable numbers from Lago Catemaco, Veracruz, Mexico south to Northern Columbia. Inhabiting lowland forest up to about 2500

feet in elevation, it seldom ventures outside the dense forest as does the smaller aracarís and toucanets. Much of the year it remains in flocks roaming from fruiting tree to tree. During the spring months the males spread out among the forest and perch atop a tall tree where they emit that froglike "Gaab" for hours on end. Nesting in holes, generally in live trees where a branch broke off, or a woodpecker home from past years, the toucan lays its one to four dull white eggs in an unlined cup that may be from several inches to several feet below the entrance.

Although a fruiteater most of the year it frequently has been observed feeding small lizards and insects to its young. Not kept as pets by the natives, it is a frequently hunted species as it is fairly tasty and is easy prey for even the poorest shot with a slingshot. This was illustrated vividly when I discovered a Polaroid type photo of a young Indian holding five keel-bills by their feet. Apparently these were prized trophies as he had a large smile of pride on his face. The photo was posted on the wall of a hut where the residents of the village gathered. Although such activities undoubtedly have an affect on the local population, it is the loss of habitat that creates the greatest problem.

A smaller but equally colorful species,





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Nesting in a hole created by the loss of a tree limb, Keel-billed Toucans are one of the few stereotyped birds of the "jungle" that are generally in abundance.

the Collared Aracari (*Pteroglossus torquatus*) shares much of the same range with the Keel-billed Toucan, but ventures outside the lowland forest into woodland edges and coffee and fruit plantations. It also can be encountered in higher elevations, being recorded up to 4000 feet. Not as froglike of a call, its squeaky "we-chip" really doesn't stand out in the forest as does the Keel-billed toucan's call. I have seen a number of

these aracaris flying across my path in varying numbers but have never discovered a nest. A friend involved in making wildlife films did find such a nest and documented it feeding its young insects and lizards. Having the strange habit of communal roosting in tree cavities, several birds will pile into a cavity at dusk. With tails vertical and bills over their backs, they pass the night. The species is not hunted to the extent of the larger toucans but the slash/burn techniques of agriculture will undoubtedly affect its population if the natives continue.

A much less colorful toucan, the Emerald Toucanet (*Aulacorhynchus prasinus*), being green with a black and yellow bill, blends in well with the upper canopy of the forest where it spends most of its life. Having heard several individuals state that "an Emerald Toucanet nested in this tree," or, "this is the type of tree that Emerald Toucanettes like," it was only last year that I finally discovered such a tree and nest cavity with the toucanettes in residence! Even with the knowledge that such birds are in a tree is no assurance that you will be able to locate them. The possibility of locating a nest is equally as fruitless (unless you follow a bird into a cavity) as they generally prefer holes with tangles of vegetation at the entrance. The most wide ranging of the three toucans found in Northern Central America, it is considered to be a bird of the highlands and cloud forest, from Southern Mexico into Costa Rica. There it

is replaced with the Blue-throated Toucanet (*A. caeruleogularis*), but this species is considered by many to be only a different race of *A. prasinus*. Although moving to the highlands and cloud forest to breed, it can frequently be observed in the lowland forest during the non-breeding season. The nesting cavity I found was in lowland forest, therefore some do nest in lowland forest but the general rule is that they move up into higher elevations.

Years ago I had a young Collared Aracaris for a pet and found it to be very affectionate. It would roost on the bedpost with tail vertical and bill over its back. Fed a diet of fresh fruit and monkey chow, they thrive well and are good pets for individuals who want to put a bit of the tropics into their house but aren't too keen on having the morning alarm followed by screaming parrots. Several individuals have had recent success with breeding the most commonly imported species, including the emerald, keel-billed, crimson-rumped and red-billed. The determination of sexes is generally done by the differences in bill size. Several birds, if placed in one large cage, will pair off in spring. Caution must be taken in this method as they become aggressive after paired and will require separation if you wish to take out the same number of toucans as you put in. Given a natural type log with a cavity, the birds will (with a little luck) multiply.

One note should be made—the pet toucan in my possession had the strange habit of shaking its bill after feeding, thus requiring you to scrape dried banana off the ceiling! Oh the joys of having pet birds!

If you are interested in these three species of toucans, I recommend that you obtain copies of the following publications:

Josselyn Van Tyne—The Life of the Toucan (Keel-billed). Misc. Pub. No. 19. Univ. Mich. Mus. Zool. Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Helmuth O. Wagner—Notes on the Life History of the Emerald Toucanet. Wilson Bull. 56:2:65-76. (Publication of the Wilson Ornithological Society).

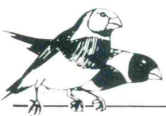
Alexander Skutch—Life History of the Collared Aracaris. Condor 60:4:201-219 (Publication of the Cooper Ornithological Society).

Other Toucans . . .

Jurgen Haffer—Avian Speciation in Tropical South America, with a Systematic survey of the Toucans (Ramphastidae) and Jacamars (Galbulidae). 1974 Nuttall Ornithological Society. \$25.00 U.S. ●

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