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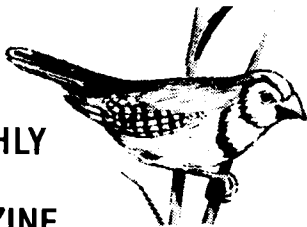
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from
the field . . .

by Jack Clinton-Eitniear
McAllen, Texas

Editor's Note:

Being the daughter of a noted naturalist and wildlife tour guide, Diane Weyer has literally grown up with the wildlife of Belize, Central America. She is a free-lance writer drawing upon a wealth of experience with wildlife in the field and she also teaches jungle survival to British army commandos.

Field Editor Jack Clinton-Eitniear

the bird that sounds like a jaguar

by Diane Weyer
Belize, Central America

Occasional splashes of sunlight reached the jungle floor. The water muttered to itself just out of sight on my left, along the upper reaches of Bladen Branch. I was scrambling along a steep, jungle covered hill looking for possible cave openings when I heard a loud crash in the trees ahead. More crashes followed. They appeared to be coming from about sixty to seventy feet up in a tree at the edge of the river. I guessed monkeys or birds, either curassows or guans. Had I been on the north side of the Maya Mountains, ocellated turkeys would also have been a possibility but not in the Bladen drainage. I couldn't see whatever was moving around so continued on until I was opposite the noises, then came down off the hillside and waited. Another crash sounded lower down.

I peered through the vegetation, unaware that I was already being watched myself. A rather hesitant "wheep wheep" made me look down. A female great curassow (*Crax rubra*) stood about forty feet away from me, her plumage blending superbly with the leaf litter. Then she

stepped forward into a spot of sunlight and the rufous on her wings glowed brilliantly. She stood and watched me, head cocked first on one side, then on the other, "wheeping" every few seconds. She raised and lowered her elegantly curled black and white crest constantly. Slowly she began walking toward me, stopping every couple of steps to peer at me and "wheep". Further crashes from above indicated the presence of her mate. He was not so curious, though he finally descended to the ground also, but kept his distance. The female stopped about twenty feet in front of me. When she made no further move in my direction, I slowly stepped toward her. She let me advance five or six feet before, neck craned and crest jerking wildly, she gave a last "wheep" and fled with great awkward flapping bounds back to her mate. They both peered at me from a variety of angles, "wheeping" to each other, before launching themselves, with much crashing, back up into the trees.

I was delighted. Great Curassows inhabit lowland jungles from southern Mexico to Columbia and Ecuador and they are hunted throughout their range. Here in Belize they are a prized game bird. It is a rare privilege to see ones as curious and unafraid as these were. Some mahogany was taken out of the upper Bladen drainage about thirty years ago. Since then, so far as I knew, only two groups of people had entered it; one was a geological survey team, and the other was myself and two friends, nearly six years previously. This time I had been asked to teach a group of the Third Queen's Regiment about jungle survival and what lives out there. Four days earlier we had been dropped in by helicopter a couple of miles downstream. You don't see much in the way of wildlife with five other people crashing through the bush with you but that afternoon I was alone, the soldiers being occupied trying to get radio communications. I had left them in a sea of radio aeriels and saw the curassows less than an hour later. My curious birds seemed proof that no one had shot curassows in this valley for a very long time.

Peculiarly, curassows take their English name from the island of Curacao in the Dutch West Indies, despite the fact that curassows have never been found there. Throughout most of their range they are known by their Spanish name, Pavo del Monte. Curassows are members of the family *Cracidae*. The cracids are, with the possible exception of the Hoatzin, the most primitive family of gallinaceous birds. They and the Noatzin are the only arboreal Galliformes.

The great curassow is the largest of all the cracids, weighing over ten pounds and measuring three feet in length. Their body shape is reminiscent of a wild turkey. Like other cracids, but unlike most fowl, the hindtoe is well developed and level with, instead of elevated above, the three foretoes. This unusual conformation allows them to grip and walk along branches with ease. The male is solid black with a pure white abdomen and undertail coverts and a brilliant yellow knob and cere. The female is a rich rufous color with fine black barring on the head and neck and wider barring on the tail. Both male and female have large, expressive, curled crests. The male's crest is black but the female's has a white band through it.

Male great curassows have a long, modified trachea which allows them considerable variety and resonance in their calls. Like the females, males give soft hoots and mutterings at frequent intervals, apparently to stay in touch with their mates, and "wheep" when alarmed. But the male is best known for his "booming" call which is generally associated with courtship. When "booming", the bird hunches forward and lowers his head. The "boom" is not particularly loud but has a ventriloquial quality about it and is frequently mistaken for a jaguar grunting in the distance.

Once a female has been duly courted by displays of "booming" and strutting, the male builds, or helps build, the nest. This tends to be a surprisingly small and poorly constructed platform of green leaves and twigs placed not far above the ground. There the female lays two very large white eggs and incubates them for 29 to 34 days. The chicks are active and can climb branches immediately. After the first couple of days, they roost high in the trees where the female broods a chick under each wing. Dr. Stephen M. Russell reports that females may give a loud, mammal-like snarl when defending their young. Unlike most gallinaceous birds, curassow chicks need to be fed by their parents until they learn to eat by themselves.

Although great curassows spend much of their time in trees, they feed primarily on the ground, preferring to pick up fallen fruit rather than pluck it while still on the tree. They are fruit eaters, and will often eat very green fruit, but they will not hesitate to catch any large insects, curassows have been known to take lizards and even small rodents. Curacids are some of the few birds known to consume mineral clays, rather in the manner of mammals at salt licks.

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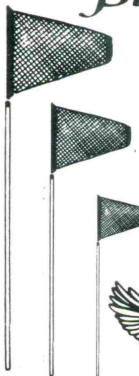
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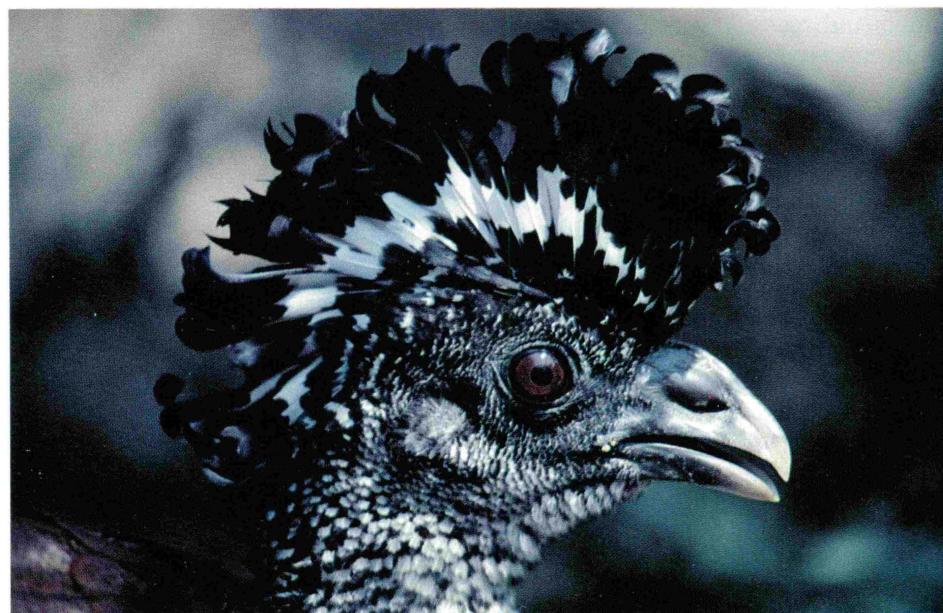
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A pair of great curassows (Crax rubra)



Only the female great curassow has the white bar in the crest.

domesticate curassows and the other cracids from the time of the first European settlements in the New World, but without success. They are hardy birds and quickly become tame. They are, however, very sensitive to cold and their feet are especially prone to frostbite, making heated quarters necessary in cold climates. Even in warm climates, there are drawbacks in keeping large numbers of curassows. Being arboreal, they require large pens with plenty of branches to perch on and places to nest above ground. Further, while they get on well with domestic fowl, they are inclined to fight viciously when several curassows are confined together. They do well in zoos, but their monogamous nature, small clutch size, and disinclination to breed in captivity have made domesticat-

ing them impractical. Dr. Jesus Estudillo Lopez of Mexico City is one of the world's leading authorities on the raising of cracids.

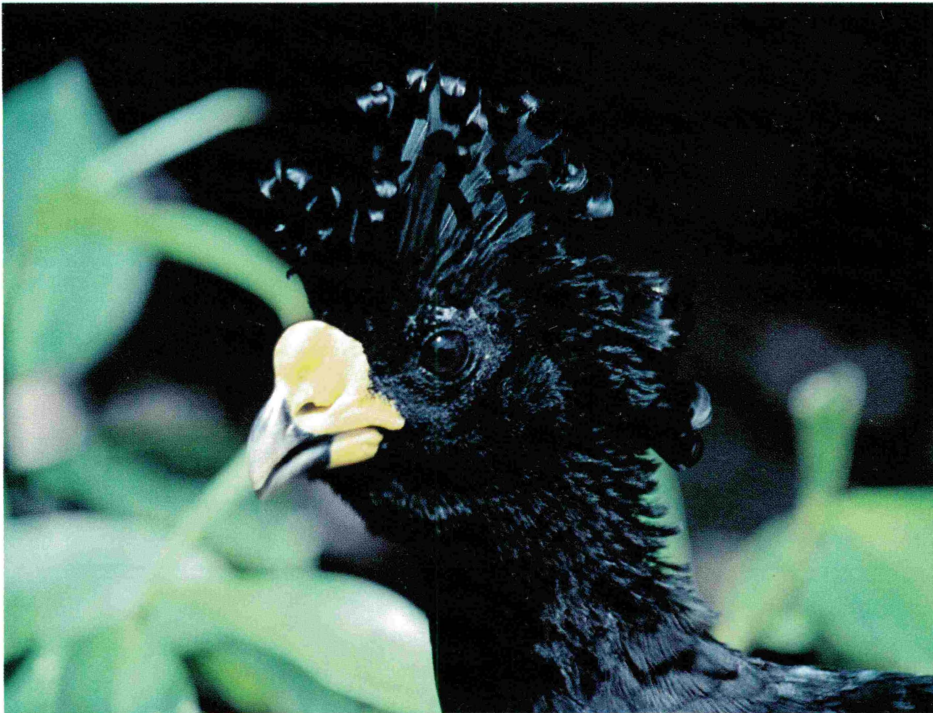
A year almost to the day after my sighting of the curassows on Bladen Branch, I was pleased to see several during the course of three days spent in the Chiquebul area of Belize. The Chiquebul forest used to be one of the most inaccessible areas of Belize. Six months ago, a friend and I hiked fifty-two miles through it, thirty-one on a new logging road in current use, (though we saw only one vehicle during that time). We sighted curassows four times as well as ocellated turkeys three times and innumerable chachalacas, smaller members of the *Cracidae*. But we also saw a number of shotgun shells along the track and all of

the birds were wary, flying immediately. Belize is the least populated country in Central America and, as such, one of the main reservoirs of wildlife left. But even though the Maya Mountains are untouched by four-lane highways, are in fact uncrossed even by mule trail over most of their length, logging and slash-and-burn agriculture are encroaching steadily.

Though curassows have many natural predators, including eagle-hawks and the larger cats, man is their chief nemesis

throughout their range. Neither curassows nor their natural predators can survive in the face of increasing human populations except in protected areas which are few and far between in Central America. Belize has recently enacted legislation to allow the formation of wildlife reserves and national parks, several of which are under current study. With luck and a lot of money and hard work, there will be room for great curassows to live in the wild for a long time yet here in Belize. ●

Photos courtesy of Wildfilms (Belize) Ltd



The great curassow male has an almost tousled crest and a bright yellow knob on the cere.

The predominantly black great curassow is very difficult to spot in the dark rain forests it inhabits.



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