

LIME
WONDERFUL
WILDLIFE

NATURE

FOCUS ON...

Songbird superstar

Meet the little Caribbean bird that's almost as famous as Rihanna!



ANTHONY LEVESQUE

It's great to see someone from the Caribbean making it big on the world stage. It's a buzz to watch Rihanna, Rupee and Machel Montano entertain globally, and our athletes succeed at Olympic level. But there are other stars that have become famous beyond our boundaries: our beautiful birds.

The Caribbean has a unique assortment of birds. Many are restricted to just one or two islands, due to factors such as habitat loss, human disturbance, disease or competition. Others are widespread across many countries.

One of the most common, widespread and well-known is the Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*). This small songbird is known by its long, slightly down-curved black

beak, black upperparts, prominent white eyebrow stripe, yellow breast, belly and rump, and white wing spot. Its local name varies: in The Bahamas it's called the 'Banana Bird', 'Sugar Bird' in Barbados, 'Beeny Bird' in Jamaica, 'See-see Bird' in Grenada.

Bananaquits are found in The Bahamas, the Greater Antilles (except mainland Cuba) and Lesser Antilles, Central America and parts of South America. This expansive range has led researchers to study the distribution of this truly Caribbean species. What they found was intriguing.

Researchers collected DNA samples of Bananaquit populations throughout the Caribbean and from populations in Central and South America. Their analysis of the genetic data showed that the Bananaquit initially evolved in the Greater Antilles over 2 million years ago and subsequently expanded its range into Central America and through the Lesser

Antilles into South America. This pattern is unusual because the ancestors of most island birds and other animals have evolved on the mainland and then colonised islands over time. The researchers concluded that islands might therefore be significant sources of biodiversity for continents.

The research also showed that there are genetically distinct populations within the region. So with more work we could one day have more than one species of Bananaquit in the Caribbean.

The Bananaquit has captured the hearts of humans throughout the region and in the Americas. This feathered superstar, like all of our birds, requires protection and assistance. By planting native fruit trees, setting up bird feeders, and supporting wildlife conservation organisations such as BirdsCaribbean, you can help keep all of our Caribbean birds happy, healthy and free.



BIRD BEHAVIOUR

LITTLE YELLOW SCOUNDRELS

Bananaquits feed on a variety of foods, including insects. But nectar is their special treat – and they'll even steal to get it!

Many species of flowering plants have evolved a working relationship with hummingbirds. Their flowers developed into long, deep nectar reservoirs, specially adapted to long hummingbird beaks. When a hummingbird inserts its beak into such a flower, the base of its beak gets dusted by pollen. The bird will then carry this load to another flower to pollinate it.

Enter the Bananaquit. Its beak is too short to reach a flower's nectar in the normal way. So it simply steals it – by drilling a hole at the base of the flower. Great for the Bananaquit – but the flower misses out, pollination-wise. Some hummingbirds do this, too, but Bananaquits have mastered the technique.



ANDREW DOBSON

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