

## THE OILBIRD

The Oilbird, *Steatornis caripensis*, also known as Guácharo, is a slim, long-winged bird that inhabits the northern areas of South America from Guyana and the island of Trinidad to Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia in forests and woodland with caves. It is a seasonal migrant, moving from its breeding caves in search of fruiting trees. It is a rare vagrant to Costa Rica, Panama and Aruba.

This nocturnal species, which is related to the Nightjar family, primarily feeds on the fruit of the Oil Palm and tropical laurels. All the other nightjars and their relatives are insectivores.

The Oilbird is quite large being 41-48cm (16-19") in length, with a wingspan of 91cm (3 ft). It has a flattened, powerfully hooked beak surrounded by deep chestnut rictal bristles up to 5cm (2") long. The body is mainly reddish-brown with white spots on the nape and wings; the under-parts are cinnamon-buff spotted with white. The stiff tail feathers are a rich brown spotted with white on both sides. The Oilbird's feet are small and almost useless, except for clinging to vertical surfaces. However, it is capable of hovering and twisting flight, to navigate through restricted areas of caves, where during the day these gregarious birds rest on ledges.

The nest is a pile of droppings, usually above water - either a stream or the sea, on which 2-4 glossy white eggs are laid. These are rounded but with a distinctly pointed smaller end and average 41.2 X 33.2mm. The squabs become very fat before fledging, weighing up to half as much again than adult birds. They were once harvested and rendered for oil, hence the name "Oilbird".

Although the Oilbird forages by sight, it is one of only a few birds, and the only nocturnal one, known to navigate by echolocation in poor light conditions, using a series of sharp audible clicks for this purpose. It also produces a variety of harsh screams. Entering an Oilbird cave with a light provokes these raucous calls; which may also be heard when the birds prepare to emerge at dusk.

The Oilbird is called a "guácharo" or "tayo" in Spanish, both terms being of indigenous origin. In Trinidad it was sometimes called "diablotin" (French for "little devil"), presumably referring to its loud cries, which have been likened to those of tortured men.

The Guácharo Cave, in the mountainous Caripe district of northern Monagas, Venezuela, is where Alexander von Humboldt first studied the species. The *caripensis* of the binomial name means "of Caripe", and *Steatornis* means "fat bird", in reference to the fatness of the squabs.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia