



The Harmful Pet Wildlife Trade in Trinidad and Tobago

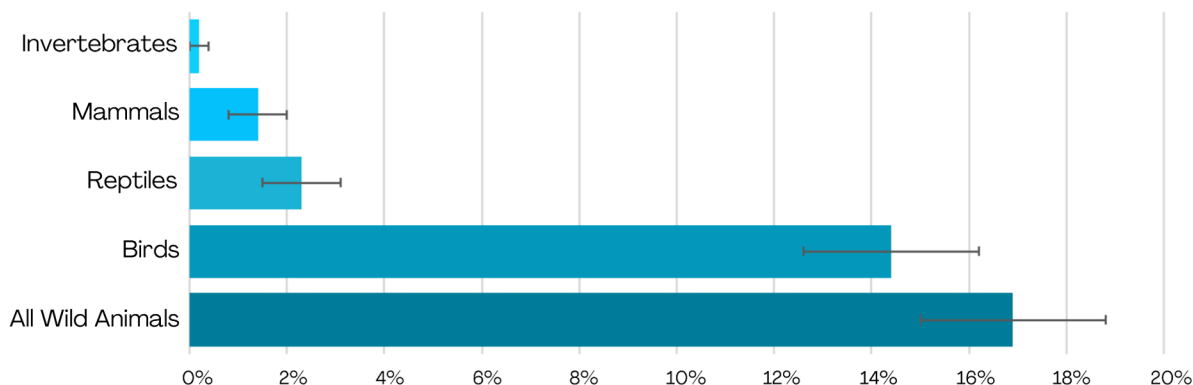
There is a large, thriving, and harmful "pet" wildlife trade in Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Southern Caribbean. Here are 15 key facts you should know.

Fact #1: Approximately 1-in-6 households keep wild animals as pets in T&T.

Based on a national survey, 16.9% ($\pm 1.9\%$) of households keep wild birds, invertebrates, mammals, and reptiles. Wild birds are most popular and are estimated to be kept in 14.4% ($\pm 1.8\%$) of households. Parrots are the most popularly kept bird order and are found in 12.0% ($\pm 1.7\%$) of households.¹

Above: Blue and Gold Macaws, once extirpated by the pet trade, have been re-established by local conservationists.
© David Steffan Huggins.

Right: Household prevalence rates of terrestrial wild animal keeping.¹

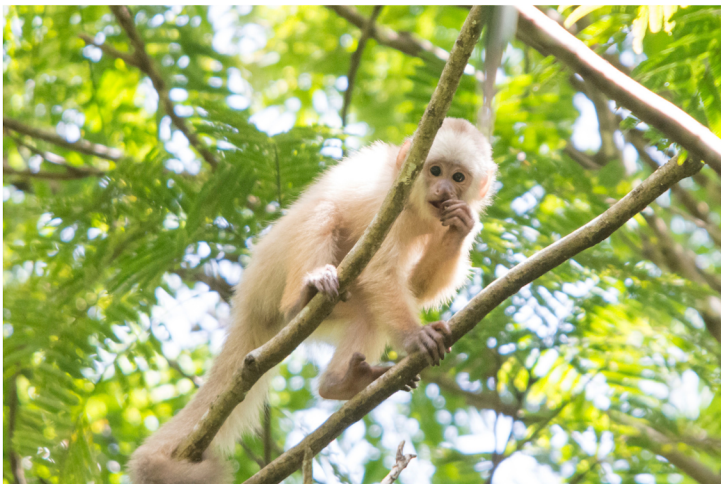


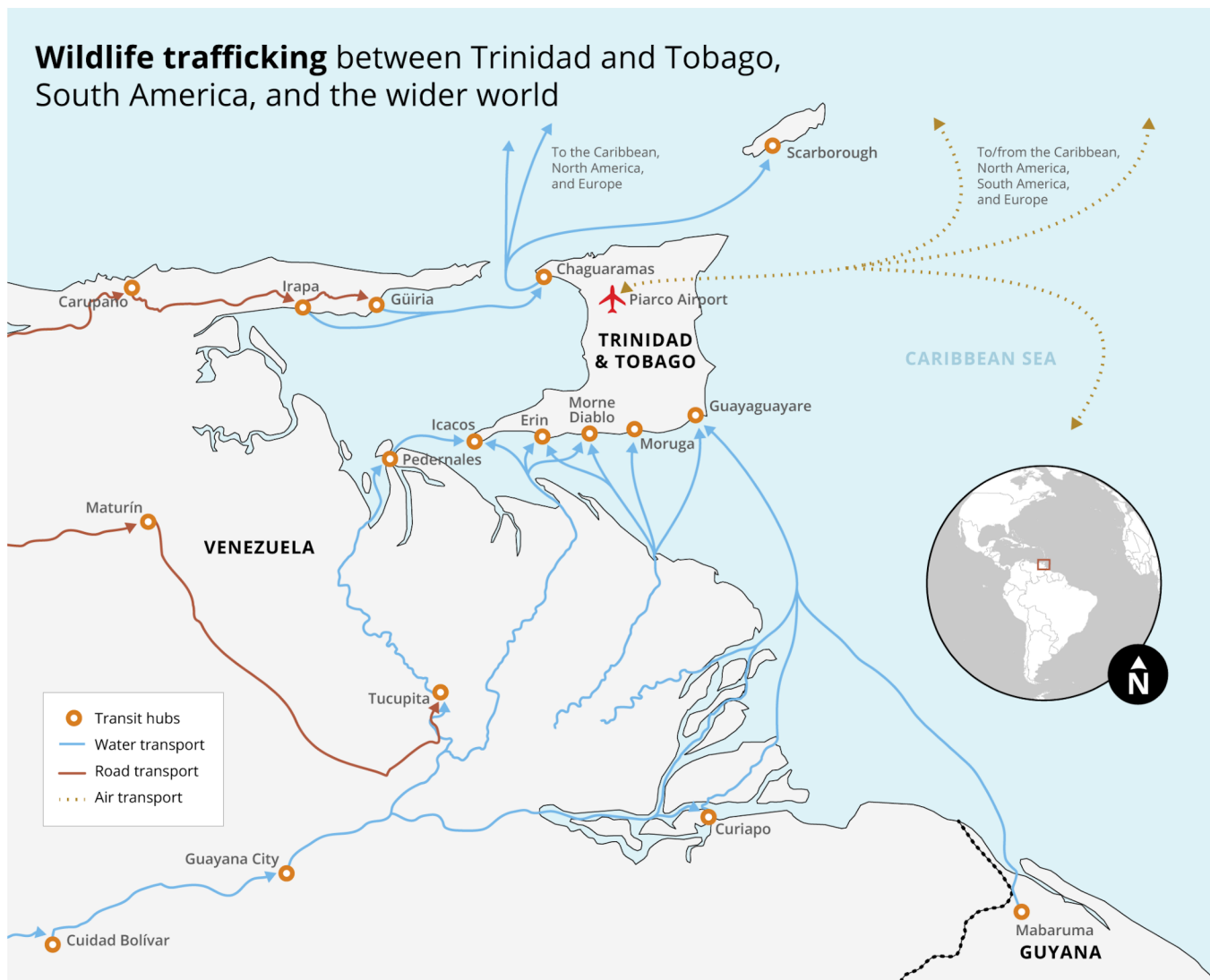
Fact #2: At least 203 terrestrial species are traded as pets. As of November 2022, the campaign has recorded 133 species of birds, 35 reptiles, 32 mammals, 2 arachnids, and 1 centipede as kept in households. New species are regularly identified, and we have unverified reports of over 100 additional species. The most commonly traded species is the Orange-winged Amazon, which is found in 7.3% ($\pm 1.3\%$) of households.^{1, 2}

Fact #3: Over one-third of traded species are unlisted under CITES. Of the 203 identified terrestrial wildlife species, 23 are listed in Appendix I, 100 in Appendix II, and 3 in Appendix III. Meanwhile, 77 species are not listed at all. The most commonly traded unlisted species is the Chestnut-bellied Seed Finch, which is found in 2.4% ($\pm 0.8\%$) of households.^{1, 2}

Below: Trinidad White-fronted Capuchin (top left), © Rose-Anne Reyes; Trinidad Piping Guan (top right), © Faraaz Abdool; Hyacinth Macaw (bottom left), © Charles J. Sharp; and Red Siskin (bottom right), © Amaury Laporte.

Fact #4: At least 34 "pet" wild animal species are threatened with global extinction. This includes many bird species sourced from the mainland, including the Red Siskin ('Endangered') and Hyacinth Macaw ('Vulnerable'). There are also two traded endemics: the Trinidad Piping Guan and the Trinidad White-fronted Capuchin, both of which are 'Critically Endangered'.³





Fact #5: Most "pet" wild animals are illegally sourced from the South American mainland. Venezuela provides the largest volumes of wildlife, with additional quantities sourced from Colombia and Guyana. Brazil also provides smaller volumes of high-value wildlife. As much as a quarter of imported wildlife is subsequently exported to other Caribbean islands and to consumer markets in the USA, United Kingdom, and Europe.⁴

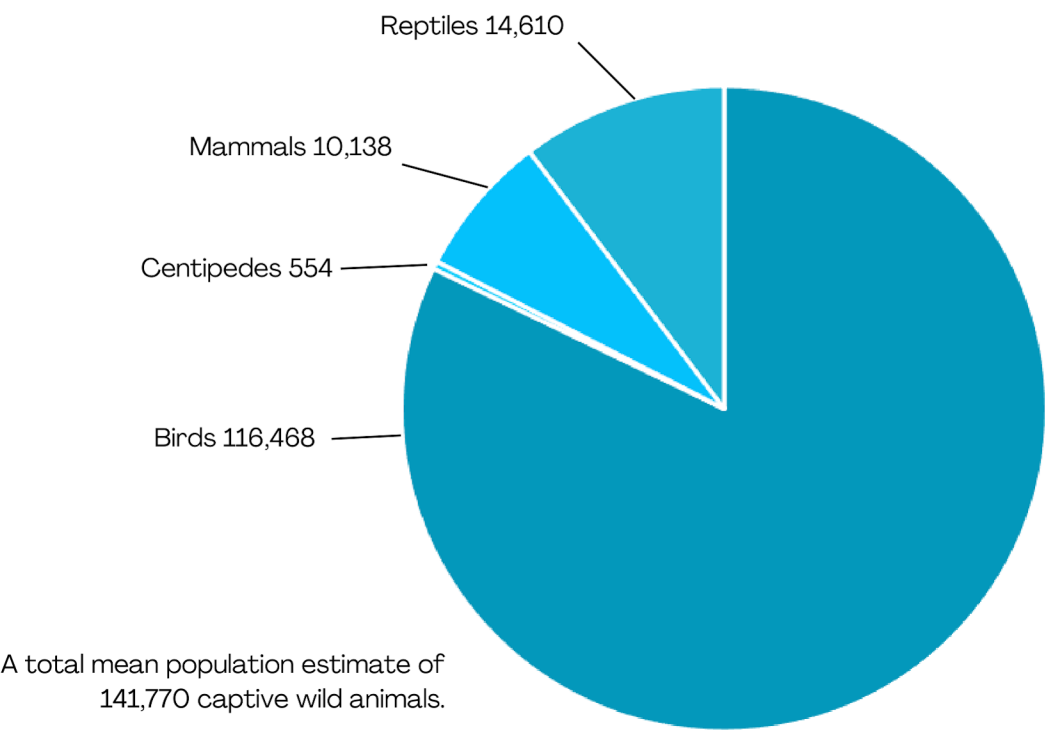
Fact #6: Wildlife trafficking results in high mortality rates, approaching 80% or more in some species. Most wildlife sold in T&T is trafficked by boat, which subjects animals to physical trauma, disease, and dehydration. Some delicate species, like sloths, rarely survive this experience. Traffickers also routinely place rocks to quickly sink cages and other containers when detected by the Coast Guard.⁴

Above: Wildlife Trade routes into and out of Trinidad and Tobago.
© Nurture Nature Campaign.

Right: Traffickers typically drown their animal cargos to destroy evidence when there is a risk of capture by the Coast Guard.
© T&T Coast Guard.



Fact #7: There are 75,000 or more terrestrial wild animals in captivity in T&T. The campaign estimates there to be between 75,120 and 229,237 captive wild birds, mammals, reptiles, and terrestrial invertebrates in a country with 1.3 million residents. This estimate is conservative as many keepers choose to not report their keeping behaviors.^{1, 5}



Fact #8: There are many 'Least Concern' and unassessed species of local conservation concern. Various songbird species are now extremely rare and some may have been extirpated due to over-trapping. Such species include the Chestnut-bellied Seed Finch, Large-billed Seed Finch, and Ruddy-breasted Seedeater. Various traded native species have also not yet been assessed for their conservation status, including the Orinoco Mata Mata Turtle and Trinidad Chevron Tarantula.⁶

Fact #9: The majority of captive wild animals are kept illegally. A national survey suggests that between 29,752 and 40,553 households keep wild animals requiring permits in Trinidad, yet in 2020, only 121 Trinidadian households were issued permits. Meanwhile, in the entire country, between 27,730 and 74,891 households keep wild animals that are always prohibited during a six-month closed season. Based on the estimated mean population, 72.1% of captive wild animals are illegally kept.^{1, 7}



Above: Pie chart of estimated mean population of captive terrestrial wild animals in Trinidad and Tobago by taxonomic class.^{1,7}

Right: The 'Least Concern' Chestnut-bellied Seed Finch, or "bullfinch," is the second most commonly kept wild animal, yet it is almost extirpated in Trinidad and Tobago. Possession of this animal requires a permit.⁶ © Nigel Lallsingh.

Fact #10: The pet trade threatens the transmission of zoonotic diseases.

The primate trade has caused cases of tuberculosis, leptospirosis, and yellow fever. The wild bird trade commonly results in transmissions of pox viruses to captive and wild populations. Local experts express grave concern that the wild bird trade also threatens the introduction of avian flu from Venezuela, which has minimal epidemiological surveillance.^{4, 8}



Fact #11: Animal abuse is common in the keeping of wild animals. Nearly all 203 species in trade score as either ‘difficult’ or ‘extreme’ for residential keeping according to veterinary assessment. Captive wild animals are ordinarily fed inappropriate diets and housed in tiny enclosures, so few live close to their potential lifespans. Based on survey reports and mean captive population estimates, approximately 93.0% of wild animals have not been seen even once by a veterinarian.^{1, 5, 9}

Fact #12: The illegal wildlife trade ordinarily converges with other illegal trades. Boat-based traffickers mix and transport a variety of contraband, including weapons, drugs, and livestock. Some Venezuelan refugees are recorded as arriving with juvenile birds and primates to sell for start-up income. Among wildlife consumers, gang members keep dangerous animals like Jaguars, Ocelots, and Green Anacondas.⁴

Above left: A despondent Red Howler Monkey trafficked from Venezuela is seized from poor conditions in a Trinidadian home. This species poses a relatively high risk of yellow fever. © Trinidad Wildlife Section.

Above right: A Blue and Gold Macaw at a tourist location shows discolored and broken tail feathers, which are signs of malnourishment. © Nurture Nature Campaign.



Fact #13: Invasive wild animals are popularly kept as pets. The Red-eared Slider Turtle, Common Waxbill, and Tufted Capuchin have been introduced through the pet trade and threaten native species. Other traded species, like the Burmese Python, Indian Ringneck, and Black Spot Piranha, pose invasive species risks but have not yet become introduced.²

Fact #14: There is a lack of capacity to enforce wildlife laws in Trinidad and Tobago. There are only 49 Game Wardens, one for every 105 square kilometers, who are responsible for issuing permits, patrolling, public education, and many other duties. Meanwhile, the Customs and Excise Division is similarly understaffed and under-resourced and is unable to monitor cargo containers appropriately.^{7, 10}



Above: A non-native Tufted Capuchin and child make their home in the home range of Trinidad Red Howlers. © David Steffan Huggins.

Right: A faded logo on one of the few patrol vehicles available to Trinidad Game Wardens. © Nurture Nature Campaign.

Fact #15: Trinidad and Tobago laws are insufficient for wildlife trade regulation. The country has been placed in Category II of CITES parties, meaning its national laws generally do not meet all requirements for the treaty's implementation. National laws lack special rules or fines associated with endangered species or species posing invasive risks. The penalties for many traded species are also often lower than market prices. For instance, Jaguars sell for TTD 30,000 yet carry a maximum fine of only TTD 5,000.¹¹

End Notes

1. Based on a randomized survey of 2,004 households conducted with the assistance of the Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office. Figures are calculated using a 95% confidence interval.
2. Traded species have been identified through the use of multiple methods: a randomized survey of 2,004 households, a review of government enforcement and permitting records since 2016, a review of news articles since 2010, direct observation of pet shops and tourist sites, and key informant interviews with >300 participants, including traffickers, veterinarians, enforcement officers, and wild animal keepers.
3. Conservation status of traded species as established by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, ver. 2022-1. <https://www.iucnredlist.org>.
4. Based on a review of news articles since 2010 and key informant interviews with >300 participants, including traffickers, veterinarians, enforcement officers, and wild animal keepers. Trade routes in Venezuela were also substantiated through contact with experts in the Orinoco Delta, while trade routes in Grenada and Barbados were further substantiated by in-country observation of households and tourist sites.
5. Projection based on the keeping prevalence rates and median number of individual animals per species kept per household observed in a national household survey (see note 1) and estimates of the number of households in 2021 provided by the Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office.
6. The extirpation, and near-extirpation, of native songbirds has been documented by the naturalist community in Trinidad and Tobago since the 1970s. Documenting sources include: i) French, R. (1976). *A guide to the birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. Harrowood Books.; ii) Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC). (1984). Going - for a song. *Naturalist* 5(4); iii) Sookdeo, K. (2015, Oct. 29). Our vanishing cage-birds. *Trinidad & Tobago Newsday*. The non-assessment of species is evidenced by their absence in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (see note 3).
7. Data provided by the Trinidad and Tobago Wildlife Section.
8. There is no formal zoonotic disease monitoring program in Trinidad and Tobago, but local veterinary experts occasionally analyze wild animal seizures. Importantly, a study in 2019 found that the trade promotes the transmission of at least one novel pox virus. See: Suepaul, R. B., et al. (2019). Novel poxviral infection in three finch species illegally imported into Trinidad, West Indies, with implications for native birds. *Journal of Zoo and Wildlife Medicine*, 50(1), 231-237.
9. Veterinary assessment conducted using the EMODE methodology. <https://emodepetscore.com>.
10. The Customs and Excise Division is troubled by a lack of scanning equipment and endemic corruption. See: Seemungal, J. (2022, Aug. 28). Port scanners obsolete, non-functional...illegal guns, contrabands flow freely. *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*.
11. Country categories maintained by the CITES Secretariat. <https://cites.org/eng/legislation>. The primary national law governing wildlife is the Conservation of Wild Life Act. An updated draft may be found at: <https://www.nurturenaturett.org/wildlife-laws>.

About the Nurture Nature Campaign

The Nurture Nature Campaign is a coalition-based initiative to end the harmful trade in pet wildlife in Trinidad and Tobago. It is supported by 13 not-for-profit organizations and was developed through principal funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The campaign is managed by Sustainable Innovation Initiatives (SII), which seeks to solve environmental problems through collaboration and networking.

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