Icterus icterus (Troupial)

Family: Icteridae (New World Blackbirds)
Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)
Class: Aves (Birds)

Fig. 1. Troupial, *Icterus icterus.*

[http://www.birdpost.com/taxonomies/10118-venezuelan_troupial downloaded 2 November 2012]

TRAITS. Troupials are large birds with long wedge-shaped tails and bulky chisel-like bills. The main coloration observed in these birds is black and orange. The black coloration begins at the head of the bird and stretches down to the top of the bill only as the lower mandible is grey in colour. This black coloration continues to the neck and upper region of the breast. The plumage at the anterior of the neck and superior breast protrude, noticeably forming an irregular demarcation between the black and orange colour which commences from the lower breast of the bird to the underside of the tail. On the upper and lower back the orange coloration continues but is separated by the shoulders which are black in colour. *Icterus icterus* has an orange neck colour separating the head from the back. The wings of this bird are black with a patch of orange feathers on the upper extreme of the shoulder. When they are in a closed position a white band runs lengthwise along the wings. The yellow eyes of this bird are clothed with a patch of bright

blue naked skin (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999; Ridgely and Tudor, 1989). The species does not display any sexual dimorphism as both sexes look alike and there is no differentiation between the two.

ECOLOGY. Troupials tend to inhabit dry areas such as woodlands, gallery forests, plains and open savannahs compared to areas with heavy rainfall. They also frequent fruit plantations and gardens with fruit and flowers as their habitat allows them to forage for a wide variety of fruit, insects, small birds and eggs (Hilty, 2003). This national bird of Venezuela is found only in the New World specifically in the northern and central parts of South America. Countries such as Aruba, Bonaire, Colombia, Curaçao, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Saba, Saint Eustatius, Saint Maarteen and the US Virgin Islands are all native to this bird. However, on the island of Trinidad this bird is rare and infrequently observed, either as an accidental visitor or an escaped cage bird.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. *Icterus icterus is* arboreal, diurnal and sedentary. The global population size of *Icterus icterus* has not been quantified but this species is described as 'fairly common but patchily distributed' (Stolz et al. 1996). The population is suspected to be stable in the absence of evidence for any decline or substantial threats. Little information exists about the home range of troupials although year round territories may be common in this species. Troupials are arboreal animals that steal the nests of other birds and are known for their violent attacks against defending nest residents. Preferences are given to nests located lower in trees than those higher in a tree. Troupials tend to feed on the eggs and nestlings left behind. Once these birds have obtained a nest, they make modifications to the nest by adding their own nest lining or making a wider entrance. A mated pair typically uses more than one nest (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999; Ridgely and Tudor, 1989).

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. Troupials forage as a family or as a mated pair. During the breeding season, troupials forage for insects in trees and low bushes. These birds seldom forage in the vicinity of large flocks. During the non-breeding season, troupials forage along the ground for fallen fruit. Fruits of the giant cacti make up the entire diet of troupials when in season. Some of the others fruits consumed are mangoes, sapodillas, papaya, soursop, dates and malphighia cherries (Burke and Jaramillo 1999; Ridgely and Tudor 1989).

COMMUNICATION. These birds communicate utilizing visual and acoustic channels. Male troupials are noted for singing, they particularly sing in order to establish territory and to attract females. From the hours of the early morning continuing throughout the day they sing most ardently. Female troupials however sing much less and only ever in response to a male's song (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999). Despite this difference between the sexes, both of them raise their neck feathers while singing (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999). The song produced consists of long, loud, repetitive notes which resemble the call of the Baltimore orioles (*Icterus galbula*). The latest research suggested that this similarity in the song of these two birds may be due to convergent evolution (Price et al. 2007). The song of troupials cannot be easily identified as the simple notes made tend to meld together in their slow, careful progression. The song contains two to three individual notes with each of the repeated phrases. The notes themselves are hoarse whistles of a high or low pitch (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999; Ridgely and Tudor, 1989).

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. These birds form a monogamous pair that remains together throughout the year (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999). The nesting season of troupials vary by location. Throughout most of their South American range, nesting season usually lasts from March to September. In Venezuela, this season is from May to June and in the Antilles the period lasts throughout the year. Troupials are known to be nest pirates, seeking and seizing the covered, hanging, stick nests of common thorn birds (*Phacellodomus rififrons*) or the great kiskadees (*Pitangus sulphuratus*). As a determined nest bandit they are one of very few bird species that build no actual nest of their own. The stolen nest is used for breeding and both members of the breeding pair use individual nests as sleeping chambers. Ultimately, troupials utilize one nest to raise their young. For each season, they usually have about three eggs, which take about 15-16 days to hatch. These eggs are noted as having a white or whitish pink appearance with dark spots around the bottom (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999; Ridgely and Tudor, 1989). Troupials are fed equally by both parents and the hatchlings normally remain in the nest for approximately 21-23 days as these birds are altricial. Once the nesting period has elapsed the fledglings travel and forage with their parents. Some have even been observed to perch themselves in a stolen nest of their own (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999).

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. Juvenile *Icterus icterus* birds display plumage similar in pattern to that of adult plumage except for a duller orange colour and a hint of brown on the black feathers. In addition, the naked skin around the eye is a dull blue-grey colour instead of the bright blue skin of the adults (Burke and Jaramillo, 1999; Ridgely and Tudor, 1989). Other than this, very little is known about the new-borns. Once they have survived the nesting period, these young birds journey and forage with their parents until they themselves steal a nest of their own and continue on with their life.

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR. Animals tend to employ effective predator-detection strategies in order to decrease the risk of predation. Some species rely on previous experiences or learning to identify predation risks but this approach is futile when animals are exposed to unfamiliar potential predators. Instinct is another behaviour employed by animals to evade predation; this behaviour appears appropriate and in fully functional form when first performed. None of the studies conducted have examined the response of birds to unfamiliar, allopatric predator species. However, *Icterus icterus* birds are arboreal and as such have extremely well developed senses of sight and hearing in order to identify danger and escape. Regular scanning and monitoring of their environments, especially when they are exposed in open areas is crucial in the maintenance of their safety. These birds avoid attack by expecting to identify a predator before it reaches the critical distance for an attack. These arboreal animals are noted to scan both the ground and sky for terrestrial and aerial predators respectively. Also their ability of flight is of vast importance in the evasion of predators. Despite all this, recent studies have shown that the known predators of *Icterus icterus* are bot flies (Oestridae), accipiter hawks (Accipitridae) and falcons (Falco).

REFERENCES

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Fig. 2. Troupial at nest.

[http://www.lynxeds.com/hbw/photo/troupial, downloaded 4 December 2012]