

Icterus nigrogularis (Yellow Oriole or Small Cornbird)

Family: Icteridae (New World Blackbirds)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Yellow oriole, *Icterus nigrogularis*.

[<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/33885749>, downloaded 17 November 2014]

TRAITS. The yellow oriole is a bright, yellow bird with black markings on its chest, around its eyes, wing tips and tail with few white streaks between. They undergo one moult per year. The male bird plumage is brighter than the female and juvenile but they are all strikingly beautiful when viewed in their preferred habitats which are usually dull coloured. Juveniles are without the black markings and have greyish coloured markings instead (Fig. 3) and a slightly less vibrant yellow feathers than the females. Round-bodied sometimes slender with pointy beaks and long tails they are agile birds weighing around 38g and being approximately 20cm in length. Their breeding time is from January to August and they have 2-3 eggs which are off-white with brown markings. They are Passerines; these birds have a toe arrangement with 3 pointing

forward and one back, which assists in perching. They are able to hop from perch to perch with a little or no movement of their wings which shows that their toe arrangement is effective in perching and balance. This balance assists in flying as they are quite competent and fairly swift flyers frequently speeding through the swamp in pairs darting between shrubs and trees. The yellow oriole is a New World oriole, also referred to as a New World blackbird (Jaramillo & Burke, 1999) although it is not mostly black. There are subspecies of this bird which differ slightly in colour marking and size. *Icterus nigrogularis curasoensis* is only found in Curacao where it is the national bird and affectionately called the trupial kachó. *Icterus nigrogularis trinitatis* is confined to Trinidad (but not Tobago) and the Paria Peninsula of Venezuela, where it is called the gonzalito (Prins et al., 2009). This bird has many names, notably in Trinidad called the small cornbird and plantain bird.

ECOLOGY. Yellow orioles live in woodlands, scrub, arid thorns amongst mangroves as well as gardens and parks. In contrast to these drab or grey coloured backdrops the yellow oriole is quite bright and magnificent, almost like a jewel among dingy and dirt. The diet of the yellow oriole consists of berries, ripe mangoes, bananas, nectar and insects, among the three it would prefer berries the most. Other orioles like the Venezuelan oriole eat other birds' eggs and young chicks. Yellow orioles are weaver birds which create complex, elongated, woven hanging nests, made of natural fibres like twigs and grass interwoven and lined with a layer of fine feathers. They spin two fibres around each other and then weave them together, only using their beaks and legs (Figs 2 & 4). The birds will totally rebuild their nests every year in the same location. These nests are about 40cm long and usually attached to a thin branch or twig and will gently sway in the wind. Some nests are built as low as 3m from the ground and others as high as 10m from the ground but the ground or substrate is usually something uninviting like water.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. Females build the nests while their mate protects them. The birds in general are territorial and the male, being larger serves as the protector of the female and nest. Yellow orioles will sometimes live in groups of 2-8 pairs on a tree, as spotted in St. Joseph by myself a few years ago, also two pairs were spotted living next to each other on the same dead tree in the Caroni Swamp near the highway.

FORAGING. They forage either alone or in groups of two to three birds flying swiftly from tree to tree but are spotted mostly alone or pairs in gardens, marshes and mangroves. They will pierce the base of a flower to acquire its nectar and to get insects they peck tree bark. Pecking of mangoes and cherries are also methods in which they acquire sustenance.

ACTIVITY. They are active from early during the day, dawn, till early evening. All foraging is done during the day as well as nest building, courtship and feeding. Some birds may develop a dawn song, which they sing every morning at dawn but this is rarely heard.

COMMUNICATION. The yellow oriole is a part of the Icteridae family and as such they have strong, well developed larynx muscles which allow better sounding songs than other birds. The songs are short musical phrases described as a "sharp coughing bark" by Gomez (2014). They do not sing as frequently as most orioles but when they do, that is aside from barking, they produce highly musical tunes. Both the males and females sing and will make short click noises or ruckus flute-like sounds when believed to be attacked while displaying their wings in quick flaps.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. These birds breed once per year with one mate, they are monogamous like most others in their genus. Courting is usually done via an impressively, coordinated, fast-paced chase of the female by the male between trees. They lay 2-3 eggs which are white with brown markings. The females build the nests and take care of the young from incubation till they are fledglings with aid from the male in feeding nestlings and fledglings (Orians, 1985) The males will fly to and from the nest with the female while she builds the nest, maybe even pick up a twig but will not actual build it. Clearly nest building is something the females learn and the males do not which could be due to their roles. This is a breeding benefit as while the males guard the females incubate the eggs and feed hatchlings, thus limiting the possibility of offspring loss and nest stealing.

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. There was little to no information on juvenile behaviour possibly due to the shape of the nest, it is hard to observe anything in the nest without disrupting the parents or structure. However fledglings have been photographed before and they simply lack the full colours of the adults.

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR. Their nests serve as a source of protection from predators for their young. The placement of the nest on something so thin and precariously positioned sometimes over water deters large predators because of the twig's instability. With it hanging like a sack, high above ground and with the entrance being a narrow opening at the top, few predators can enter, only other birds, those of which there are not many that eat eggs. The Venezuelan oriole is one of the few egg eating and young chick eating birds which can fit in the yellow oriole's nest opening. A predator problem which the yellow orioles are yet to solve is the problem of nest invasion by other birds. Due to the advantages of the nest type and location, other birds may steal the nest or lay their eggs in the nest unknown to the yellow oriole already nesting there. These parasite eggs will be kept warm among the yellow oriole's own eggs and later hatch and receive better treatment than the mother's actual chicks. This is seen with the shiny cowbird in Curacao where the young of these birds are raised by yellow orioles after their chicks perish from malnutrition from being fed little food after hatching. The invasive chicks have brightly coloured mouths so they are more attractive to the yellow oriole adult and are fed more than her own chicks. Evolution has not stepped in yet for the yellow orioles to be able to distinguish from their chicks or eggs and the invasive ones yet so rejection is not possible. While foraging if a predator approaches they will make a warning sound like a loud click three times and flutter their wings and if the predator continues to advance they fly away, as aforementioned, these birds are very agile and flight is a good anti-predator survival route. This behaviour is similar to what they do when other birds take their food, they are not very confrontational as observed in several YouTube videos (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTS7ZOF2w4U>).

REFERENCES

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Fig. 2. Bringing food to the nest.

[<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/yellow-oriole-icterus-nigrogularis/breeder-bringing-food-nest>, downloaded 17 November 2014]



Fig. 3. Young yellow oriole, with adult in foreground.

[http://www.caribbeanfootprint.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Yellow-Oriole-young_MdaCostaGomez.jpg, downloaded 17 November 2014]



Fig. 4. Yellow oriole nest building.

[Original, Rebecca Allum 2014]

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