

## *Ortalis ruficauda* (Rufous-vented Chachalaca or Cocrico)

Family: Cracidae (Guans, Chachalacas and Curassows)

Order: Galliformes (Pheasants, Grouse and Guans)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig. 1.** Rufous-vented Chachalaca, *Ortalis ruficauda*, calling out to members of its group.

[[http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p\\_p\\_spp=75751](http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p_p_spp=75751), downloaded 29 October 2011]

**TRAITS.** The rufous-vented chachalaca (*Ortalis ruficauda*) is also known in Trinidad and Tobago as the cocrico and is proudly displayed on the country's coat of arms with Trinidad's scarlet ibis. Since rufous-vented chachalacas inhabit the island of Tobago and are absent in Trinidad, it is regarded as Tobago's national bird (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2010). They are galliforms, which are vegetarian, fowl-like birds with short stout beaks and strong breast muscles. Adults can reach up to 55 cm in size and has a combination of brown to olive toned plumage, with small areas covered in grey feathers (Kenefick et al. 2007). The throat is bare and rufous (reddish-brown coloration), its bill and legs are grey, and the loreal skin (bare skin around the eyes) is dark blue (Kenefick et al. 2007). They have strong robust legs for scratching and running, short wings and a well developed long broad tails. Chachalacas are the smallest of the family Cracidae which also include guans and curassows. There are fifty members of this turkey-like family which lives in the western hemisphere (Kenefick et al. 2007).

**ECOLOGY.** Its distribution ranges from the Southwest United States, Southern America, and Caribbean islands of the Grenadines, Tobago, and Margarita Islands (Kenefick et al. 2007, Bond n.d.). The species is quite abundant in Tobago. Its habitat ranges from thick deciduous forests, gallery forest, terra firme forest edge, secondary forests to brushes and even gardens. Although

agricultural land has proved to sustain the birds better than natural forests, and is possibly due to the constant and dependable food source (Schmitz-Orn  s, 1999). Rufous-vented chachalacas are present in Trinidad, but these are individuals which are kept in captivity in places such as the Sugarcane Feeds Centre.

**SOCIAL ORGANISATION.** They congregate in small flocks of about ten individuals and display various social behaviours. Three type of groups were described (by Schmitz-Orn  s 1998), the first is described as a “basic unit”, where a male and female who usually duet at dawn and dusk. The second is named “family group” and is composed with a breeding pair and young and almost juveniles that share the same sleeping area, the final type of congregation is the “flock”. The flock is a combination of several basic units and family groups which usually share the same general area and forage together (Schmitz-Orn  s 1998). To a certain extent these flocks stay together, continuously communicating with each other by soft peeping or clucking (Ffrench 1991). Social behaviour is especially crucial to the development of young birds. Even though Rufous-vented chachalaca has precocial young (capable of moving independently after hatching), their behaviour is still a combination of acquired and instinctive behaviour.

**ACTIVITY.** Rufous-vented chachalacas are mainly arboreal, and tends to stay about 10 to 20 feet above the ground, but they are also seen on the ground where they can be seen preening and dust-bathing. They seem to be most active during the morning and evening, when the calls are most frequently heard.

**FORAGING BEHAVIOUR.** They quite gregarious and eat fruits such as mangoes, and particularly those from *Euterpe* palm, berries, and leaves. Rufous-vented chachalacas are also found foraging on the ground looking and scratching the ground for seeds, some wild birds have also been seen eating soaked bread at a feeding table (Ffrench 1991). Birds feed during their most active time, that is, during in the morning and late afternoons.

**COMMUNICATION.** The sound they make is loud and grating with four syllables. A *ka-ka-ra-ka*, stressing on the first and last syllables. Birds often duet and when there are several pairs together, they sound tumultuous. They were reported to be territorial especially around nesting season where breeding pairs defend areas within the flock’s territory vigorously (Schmitz-Orn  s 1998). In threatening displays, adults raise their chest and make raucous calling and wing flapping (Figure 1). They also make a series of soft calls including a higher pitched *ka-k-ka-creeo* and various clucks especially while feeding.

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR.** Mating is reportedly done around the end of January or February and young birds start to emerge a few weeks later. The courtship ritual includes a duet between male and female. Males make a lower-pitched note while females respond with a high-pitched *watch-a-lak* (Hilty 2003). Breeding occurs at different times throughout the year, with nest building form low to moderate levels of elevation. Nests are poorly built and made from dried sticks, leaves and sometimes vines for added support and dried grass (Figure 2). In an observation (by Schmitz-Orn  s 1998) a rufous-vented chachalaca was found nesting in a dove’s nest, a behaviour shared by the plain chachalaca. They nest in different locations, even in clearings that are recently burnt and only consist of secondary growth vegetation (Schmitz-Orn  s 1998). Their flexibility in nesting site gives them the advantage from constant damage to their environment.

The clutch size is between two to four, pale yellow, rough shelled eggs, ranging from sizes between 66.3 by 44.7 mm (Ffrench 1991), (Figure 2). Females incubate eggs for about 26 days, and are guarded by the male. The young are capable of flying short distances one day after hatching (French 1991).

**JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR.** The young are cared for until they become almost fully adult.

**ANTI-PREDATOR BEHAVIOUR.** Rufous-vented chachalacas walk cautiously on branches, and when frightened retreats quickly into thickets (Hilty 2003). They may also fly away with quick, flat gliding wing movements. Their behaviour is not particularly timid, but will not usually perch conspicuously in open spaces. They become extremely apprehensive and alert when hunted.

## REFERENCES

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**Fig. 2.** Nest of rufous-vented chachalaca with a clutch of three eggs.

[Schmitz-Ornés, 1999]



**Fig. 3.** Parental caring by adult rufous-vented chachalaca.

[<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/rufous-vented-chachalaca-ortalis-ruficauda/luring-offspring-towards-nest> ,  
downloaded 4 November 2011]