Pitangus sulphuratus (Great Kiskadee)

Family: Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)
Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)
Class: Aves (Birds)

Fig. 1. Great kiskadee, *Pitangus sulphuratus.*
[http://www.nhptv.org/natureworks/greatkiskadee.htm, downloaded 28 October 2011].

TRAITS. This bird's adult size ranges from 9 to 10 inches with a weight within 2.2 to 2.5 oz. These birds have black legs and feet, short, thick, black beaks, brown and rufous fringed backs, wings and tail, a yellow chest and belly, white throat and black and white stripes on its head with

the white stripe around its crown above the eyes (Wikipedia, 2011). The wings are pointed and cover a 16 inch span when in flight and its tail is rounded. The male and female look the same. The boat-billed flycatcher is similar but lacks the rufous (reddish-brown) fringed wings (Fig. 2).

ECOLOGY. The great kiskadee can be found mainly in Texas and Southern America to Argentina and in the tropics in Trinidad. Later in the 1950's and 70's they were found in Bermuda and Tobago respectively. They dwell in opened woodland areas where there are orchards, parks, streamside thickets, groves and human activities (Peterson, 2009). They can be seen perched on the branches of tall trees. As the family name suggests, this bird is a derby flycatcher. Its diet mainly consists of insects that it catches in flight, berries and small lizards and frogs on tree branches and sometimes fish and tadpoles that it dives for in shallow waters (Peterson, 2009). These birds hunt either in pairs or singly and do not feed with other species. In the ecological food web the great kiskadees are predated by coral snakes or mammals that are capable of hunting sleeping birds (Nature Works, 2011).

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. Kiskadees are monogamous, that is, they only have one mate. Females lay about two to five creamy-white and brown eggs in a domed shape nest that they make using sticks, grass, moss and bark (Lago-Paiva, 1996). These nests are built with one entry, lined with soft feathers in a thorn tree or bush about 10-20 feet up. Both male and female kiskadees guard the nest and parent the babies so they are territorial birds (Nature Works, 2011). These birds are increasing their population as forests are being cut down so more suitable habitats are made in the tropics. It is estimated that global distribution is about 16,000,000 km^2. These birds have distinct call noises but are not categorized as songbirds so are considered a wild species, not kept as pets especially since they also prey on live animals (Wikipedia, 2011). Although they hunt either singly or in pairs, and are seen in flight and sometimes perching alone, they are both active parents in their young's life so they are considered solitary nesters.

ACTIVITY. At dawn this bird makes its loud call noise and longer variations which it repeats (Bouglouan, 2011). They hunt for live prey during the summer as long as there is food available and in the winter they eat seeds and berries found on the ground or on branches. The mating process begins in late March. Several broods are produced per season (Bouglouan, 2011). The females incubate their eggs for about 13 to 15 days in the nest.

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. During flight the wings appear to flutter slowly as if the body is too heavy to carry (Bouglouan, 2011). This bird remains perched while observing its prey before it attacks. It seeks the best time to launch forward to catch its live prey in its beak either on a branch, leaf or in the air or even diving briefly into shallow waters. After snatching its prey it proceeds to take the still live animal back to a stable place such as a branch and pummels it onto the surface until it dies before eating it. Kiskadees also destroy the nests of other birds to acquire material to build their own (Bouglouan, 2011). These birds are fully aware of their environment, shown by turning and bending their heads toward the direction of any movement. It can also be observed that while still on a branch it can flex its beak and shift its body to look around. The bird can also cant its gaze while whiffling its feathers to spot any desired target. The colours of the great kiskadee allow it to camouflage itself as flora while hunting.

During a procedure for an animal behaviour lab, one of these birds made itself known by interrupting the experiment to capture a piece of food. The foraging behaviour of the bird was

observed first hand. The kiskadee remained perched on the roof of a short building without making any sounds or sudden movements. It used its head to observe the surroundings as it turned from left to right briskly. At the moment when there was no activity around a piece of cheese on the grass the bird suddenly swooped down and snatched it with the beak, flying off to a quiet place on the ground to consume it. After this feeding the bird returned above the same area, flying from the roof to a nearby tree observing the surroundings. Having been seen and recognised of its intentions the bird had an obstacle or competition to get to the rest of food. It made noises this time as if to scare off its competition which were the people performing the experiment. The bird, determined, remained perched on a branch above the food until the experiment was over about two hours after.

COMMUNICATION. A loud recognisable sound is made when these birds are alerting other creatures that a predator is around. The more frequent sounds made by the birds are a slower less startling call; a social communcation. The sound made almost sounds like they say their name, kiskadee. This kiskadee call is heard right through the year. The softer calls are heard in repetition when made. Physically their appearance is used by other birds and animals to know of its presence. The colourful body of the bird makes it very visible to other birds of its family. It deters predators who will not be interested in another species with the same physical characteristics, (Wikipedia, 2011).

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. These birds lay about three to four eggs subsequent to which the female stays incubating them for about 15 days before they hatch. The mating begins in late March and several times each season they produce young. Kiskadees have only one mate each throughout their life that is they are monogamous. Within this species both the females and males build the nest so the choice of a lifelong mate is not determined by the quality of nest building as some males in bird species do. In these birds sexual maturity sets in after one year, (Bouglouan, 2011).

JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR. Consequent to being laid in the nest built and guarded by both parents the young kiskadees begin to fly and leave the nest after 35 days, (Bouglouan, 2011). They are fed by their parents until this time. The adult uses its beak to place the food into the beak of the juvenile. When they eventually leave the nest they forage like adults.

ANTIPREDATOR BEHAVIOUR. Males and female are aware of predators and guard their nests, protecting themselves, their home and their young. The male is seen perched over the nest moving its neck left to right observing its surroundings for any threats. Its loud call is used to fight off predators in an attempt to scare them off and also warn others of its presence. It may sometimes rush into its predator also trying to scare them off as this bird is a brave one. Its flight is well controlled and is used to catch prey and flee from predators or even scare them away. The primary predator of this species is the coral snake which causes kiskadees to stay away from anything with its appearance. Camouflage is a tact also used by the bird toward prey and predator. The fighting attack toward a predator is done almost suddenly by the targeted bird and during hasty flight toward the predator the loud calls are made to their mate to alert them for help in attacking, (Smith, 2006). Both birds can now band together successfully driving their predator away.

REFERENCES

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Fig. 2. Great kiskadee (left), boat-billed flycatcher (right); notice the lack of rufous in the wings of the latter.
[http://www.trinidadbirding.com/trips/2009_TT_Nov/11_11.htm, downloaded 28 October 2011]

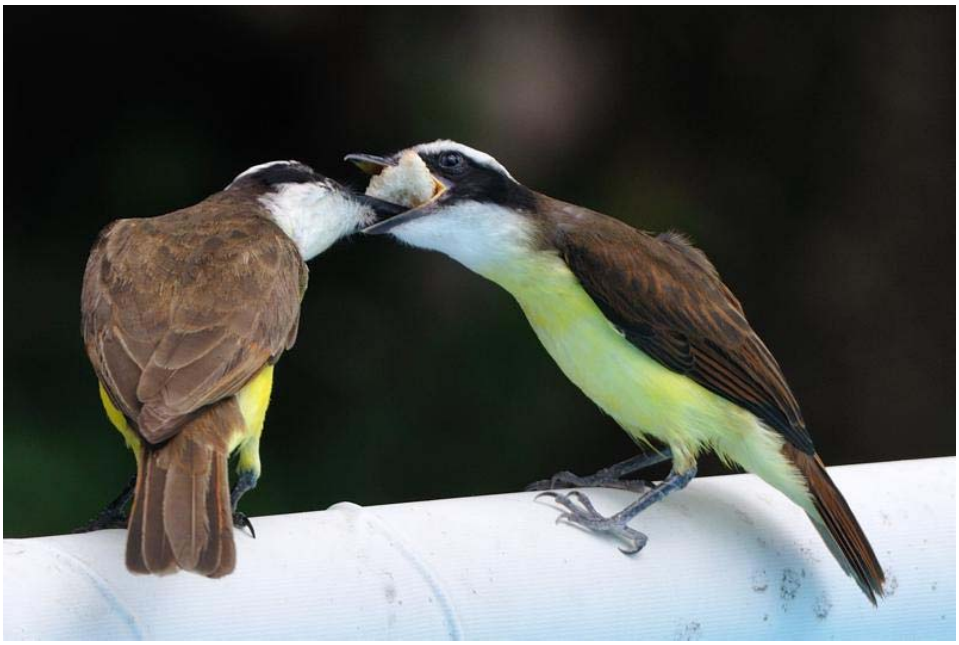

Fig. 3. An adult kiskadee feeding its young.
[http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/great-kiskadee-pitangus-sulphuratus/adult-feeding-juvenile, downloaded 8 November 2011]

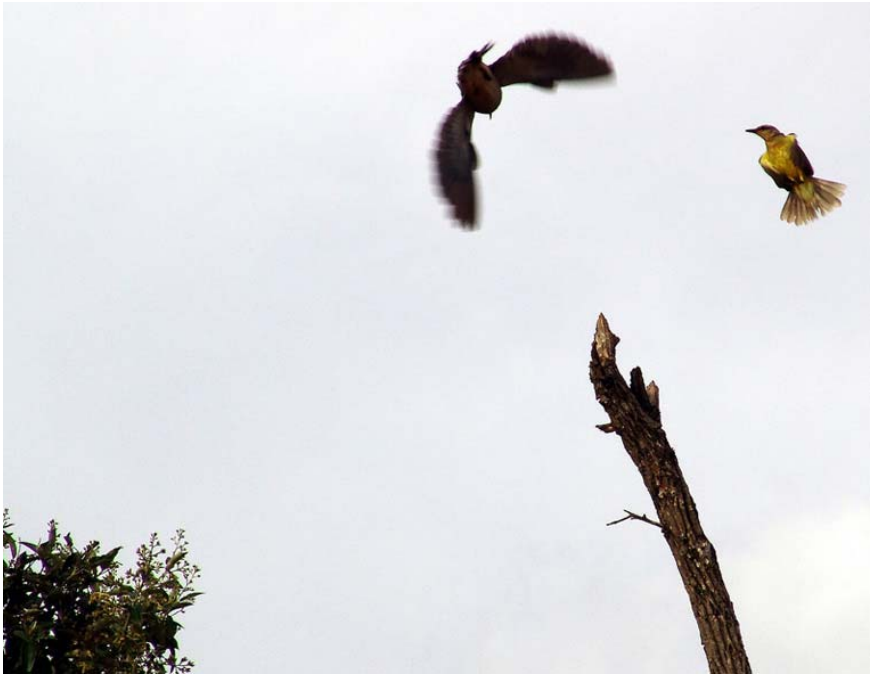

Fig. 4. A kiskadee threated by its predator scares it off by rushing at it.
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bem-te-vi_e_gavi%C3%A3o_REFON.jpg, downloaded 8 November 2011]

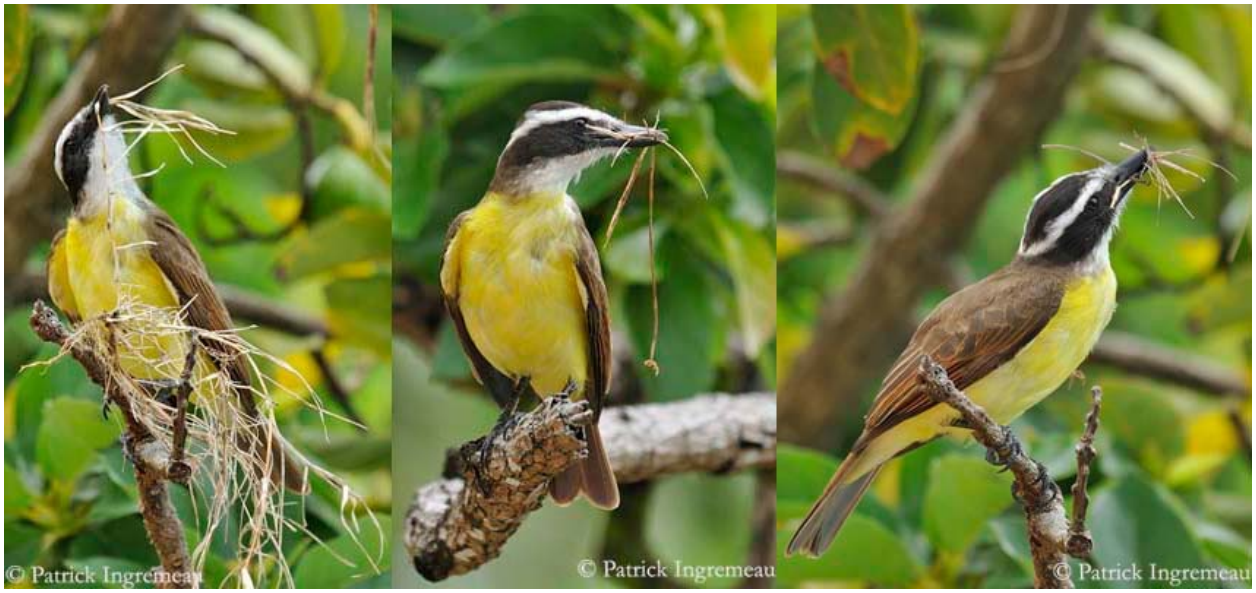

Fig. 5. Building its nest from twigs at the end of a branch.
[http://www.oiseaux-birds.com/card-great-kiscadee.html, downloaded 8 November 2011]