

Megarynchus pitangua (Boat-billed Flycatcher)

Family: Tyrannidae (Tyrant Flycatchers)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Boat-billed flycatcher, *Megarynchus pitangua*.

[http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p_p_spp=477996, downloaded 9 March 2017]

TRAITS. The adult boat-billed flycatcher is one of the largest of its family, with a length of 23cm and a weight of 70g (Wikipedia, 2017). The flycatcher's upper plumage is olive-brown, whilst the under plumage has a clear yellow colour, and a white throat. The crown has a black stripe bordered by white stripes on each side, which almost meet in the back of the head. Under this is a thick black stripe that covers the sides of the face. There is also a hidden patch of yellow or a rufous-tawny colour on the crown. The bill is black, broad at the base, and strongly hooked at the tip of the upper mandible. They have brown eyes and blackish legs. Both males and females share a similar appearance (Fig. 1). The boat-billed flycatcher is often mistaken for the great kiskadee because of their similar colour pattern and size, however, what can tell them apart is the flycatcher's heavier bill and the absence of cinnamon-rufous on their wings, which on the kiskadee is conspicuous in flight (Skutch, 1951).

DISTRIBUTION. Prevalent in most South American territories, ranging from northern Argentina to Mexico, and can also be found in Trinidad (Fig. 2). The boat-billed flycatcher can withstand a number of different climatic conditions, and can also range from sea level up to 1800m in countries such as Guatemala and Costa Rica (Skutch, 1951).

HABITAT AND ACTIVITY. It is a bird that is diurnal, very fond of tree-tops, and could be found in habitats ranging from forest edges to semi-desert valleys. They are often on the move, except when they are nesting. They rarely stay in one place for extended periods, wandering over wide territories usually in pairs or family groups of 3-5. This flycatcher mainly perches itself for insects, then flies to snatch them from branches or leaves (Stiles et al., 1989).

FOOD AND FEEDING. As its name suggests, the flycatcher survives by feeding on insects (Fig. 3), however, its diet includes fruits as well. In the early months of year when it is drier, cicadas that call loudly among the trees are a constant part of the flycatcher's diet (Skutch, 1951). After the flycatcher carries its prey to a convenient location, the bird beats its victim noisily against a branch. The insect is then turned and tossed slightly in their bills and they continue beating it relentlessly until it has been thoroughly beaten on all sides. The flycatcher then finally eats its prey. Small wild figs, dry green fruits of *Cecropia* and berries of *Cissus* and *Miconia* are their choice of fruits (Fig. 4). Some fruits are easily eaten whilst other fruits are treated much like insects, and are beaten vigorously before swallowing (Skutch, 1951).

POPULATION ECOLOGY. Often found in pairs. Flocks that number from 3-5 during non-breeding seasons are usually adult flycatchers with their full grown offspring, since most boat-billed flycatchers stay with their parents even after they are no longer dependent on them for food. In the latter half of the year up to five boat-billed flycatchers could be seen, one behind the other rather than in a compact flock. If a pair of boat-billed flycatchers does not reproduce for a mating season the birds seem to remain by themselves until the following year (Skutch, 1951).

REPRODUCTION. Most nest building occurs during March. Nests are built on rare occasions 3m from the ground, but typically at 6-30m. Up to three eggs or nestlings have been recorded at some nests. Both the female and male flycatcher take turns in guarding their nest, and are often seen guarding together. They also take turns in feeding their nestlings (Fig. 5). Nestlings often leave their nests after a 24-day period, but not without their parents watching nearby (Skutch, 1951).

BEHAVIOUR. Female boat-billed flycatchers are known for being the main nest builders, doing most of the twig collecting, whilst the males stand by watching over them. Male flycatchers are known for their lovely dawn-song, which they seem to utter under great excitement (Skutch, 1951). Boat-billed flycatchers do not wait for their enemies (mostly toucans) to approach them, instead as a rule they go towards them while they are still a good distance away, trying to persuade their enemies to return to their shelters. If this does not work, the flycatcher may pounce on its enemies' backs, taking care not to be attacked by their larger bills. However, if the number of toucans are too large it may cause the flycatcher to flee back to its nests rather than to march forth to meet their enemies (Skutch, 1951).

APPLIED ECOLOGY. This species has been listed as Least Concern since it is prevalent through a large range, also being present in degraded habitats (IUCN, 2017), with no particular diet, feeding opportunistically. Thus, there is no particular reason for concern, or belief that the species is currently threatened (IUCN, 2017). There is also no record of this species having any major threats.

REFERENCES

IUCN. (2016). *Megarynchus pitangua*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

<http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/22700533/0>.

Skutch, A. F. (1951) Life History of the Boat-Billed Flycatcher. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4080796.pdf>.

Stiles, F. G. Skutch, A. F and Gardner, D. (1989). A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica. Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing Associates.

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Fig. 2. Boat-billed flycatcher geographic distribution.

[<http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/boat-billed-flycatcher-megarynchus-pitangua/distribution>, downloaded 8 March 2017]



Fig. 3. Boat-billed flycatcher eating an insect.

[<http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/flaviocb/tags/flycatcher/>, downloaded 9 March 2017]



Fig. 4. Boat-billed flycatcher eating a fruit.

[<http://www.flickrriver.com/photos/flaviocb/tags/flycatcher/>, downloaded 9 March 2017]



Fig. 5. Boat-billed flycatcher feeding its nestling.

[<http://picsr.com/photos/52201444@N02/page9?nsid=52201444@N02>, downloaded 9 March 2017]