

Crested Guans

by Diane Weyer
Belize

There was a crash above my tent, followed by a splattering of dew and bits of dead twigs on the flysheet. More crashes. I slowly eased open the zip and peered up. Nothing visible through the tangle of vines and epiphytes above me but a moment later a complaining “yelp” announced my early morning visitor as a crested guan (*Penelope purpurascens*). More calls and crashes as two more guans joined the first. A fourth flew in as the first three were descending to have a better look at the strange blue “thing” that had sprung up in their territory overnight. I finally saw a dark blob about 50 feet or so above me which hopped down another ten or twelve feet closer, peering and yelping all the way. Two more blobs were just visible above and to one side. I never saw the fourth member of the party — as soon as I tried to ease my head out of the tent for a better look, the first guan jerked his head up in horror, “honked” loudly, and they all took off.

I could still hear them moving around in the trees off to my left as I crawled out and started to think about coffee. A flock of mealy parrots yelled and screeched at the dawn across the valley, but the light that inspired them on their treetop roost had not really reached through to the jungle floor. There, the dawn was made of dark shapes, like those of the guans, emerging from grey twilight. The guans appeared to be feeding in the top of a tall tree as I drank



A crested guan in the forest of Tikal National Park in Guatemala.

my coffee and shivered in the early morning wetness — occasionally a series of “clunks” ending in a final “spludge” told me a guan had dropped a piece of fruit. Another day had begun far up Bladen Branch in the Maya Mountains of Belize. Kinkajous had visited around midnight, and now the guans. Enough days from any road or trail to discourage hunters, so my small blue tent was an object of curiosity, not fear.

I felt utterly content, if a bit damp and very stiff. A scarab beetle, the size of a ping-pong ball, flew slowly and loudly out of the shadows and landed on a leaf beside me.

There appears to be a debate between authorities as to whether or not eagles are serious predators of guans, while some opt for ocelots and pumas. I have no doubt that an occasional guan is taken by an eagle, ocelot or puma, but

A young crested guan that was raised in captivity.



Crested guan.



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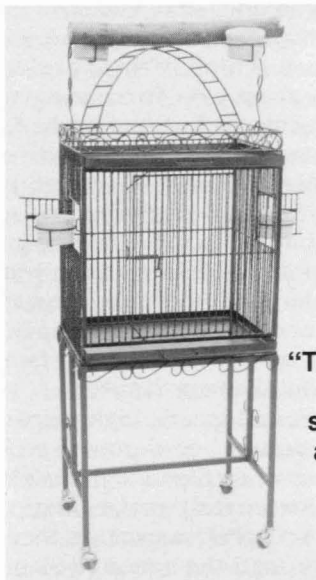
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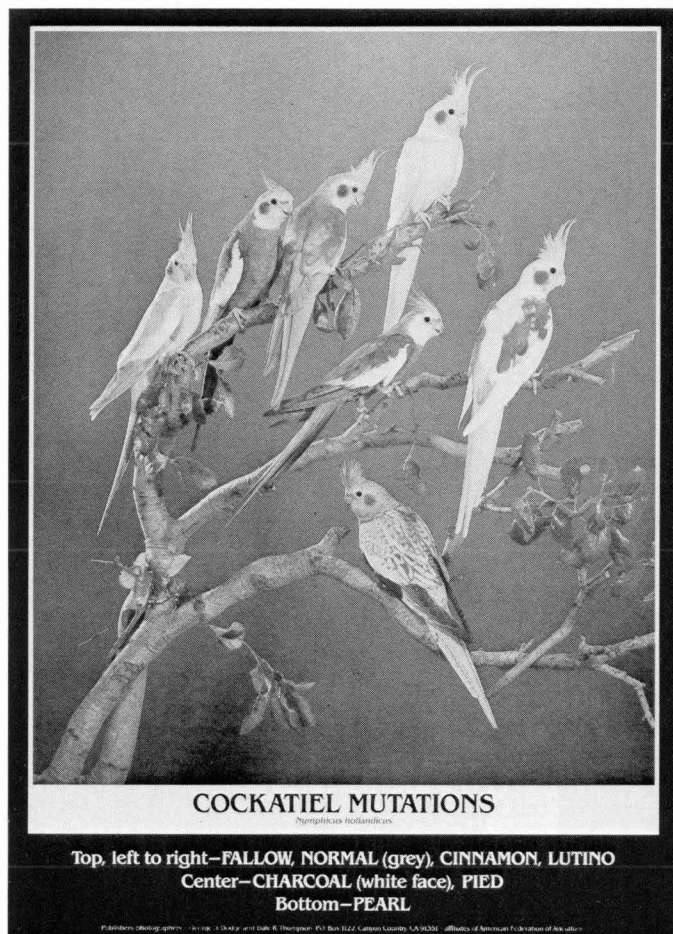
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throughout their range, the main predator of these large, succulent members of the Cracid family is man. Not only are they shot whenever possible, but man is also cutting the lowland rainforest, which is their preferred habitat, at an ever-increasing rate. Other guans, such as the horned, are already near extinction, and soon even the relatively common crested guan will only be found in reserves and zoos. This despite the fact that their range extends from mid-Mexico all the way to Columbia and Venezuela. However, there are rapidly multiplying populations of slash-and-burn farmers throughout the same range.

The crested guan's high yelps and deeper "honks" of alarm, as well as their often noisy flights and crash landings unfortunately make them easy targets. Yet, when suspicious, they can sneak through the canopy balancing delicately along branches and hopping or gliding between trees in total silence. They have a variety of quieter clucks and grunting calls as well. During courtship and breeding season they "drum" with their wings, flapping them extremely quickly as they fly, the "drumming" seldom lasting for more than a few seconds at a time. Most species of guans "drum" only before dawn or late in the evening (and occasionally during the night), but crested guans can be heard drumming during the day as well. Crested guans usually display their crests and dewlaps when "yelping" or "honking".

Crested guans make bulky leaf nests well above the forest floor. Usually only two eggs are laid, though at least one nest with three eggs has been recorded. Incubation takes 26 days. The young chicks are able to flutter and scramble about in the branches within a day or so of hatching, and from then on are brooded under the adults at night on their roosts, the nests no longer needed. Crested guans have been bred in captivity but not easily. They tame immediately and are easy to feed and maintain. They do require a good deal of fruit in their diets as well as the occasional insect or even a mouse. But despite their easy adjustment to captivity, they seem strangely reluctant to breed. One common problem, when breeding has been successful, has been the failure to provide sufficient branches for the young chicks to climb up on. As the adults generally refuse to brood on the ground, if the chicks can't reach them, they go untended.

The chicks are rich chestnut in color, mottled with buffy and black. Adult

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crested guans have dark brown heads and necks, with a sizable crest which they raise and lower in a jerky manner when suspicious or alarmed. The rest of their bodies are varying shades of brown touched with olive and blue. The feathers on their breasts and necks have conspicuous whitish edges. The bare skin around their reddish eyes is a dark slate blue. Only their dewlaps and legs are bright, these being coral colored.

Their coloration provides near perfect camouflage in the forest. I recall being confused by one that was sitting out on a bare limb, in full view, at Tikal National Park in Guatemala. Not being a passionate birder, I normally see no reason to be up and about until there is sufficient light to take photographs. On this particular occasion, however, I had been drafted as an extra pair of eyes for some early morning birding. We were standing by the aguada looking at a variety of energetic small birds but my eye kept being drawn to a large lump on a branch that I couldn't remember seeing there the previous day. Nonetheless, it looked so much like a wad of wet vegetation that I didn't even ask anyone with binoculars to check until a slight movement gave it away — a movement that would have passed as motion caused by a puff of breeze in the leaves had it not been one of those utterly still tropical mornings that presage a sweltering day!

Tikal is the only place I have been to outside of a zoo where one has a very good chance of actually seeing crested guans close up. (Monteverde National Park in Costa Rica is excellent for black guans — *Chamaepetes unicolor*). Guans tend to spend most of their time up in the canopy layers, and in the areas where they are shot, which means virtually anywhere outside of a national park, you seldom see them at all though you may hear their calls. But at Tikal, where they are protected, they will come out to sun themselves or to walk along a bare branch and peer down at the rest of the world. The latter habit is great for the birdwatcher, as binoculars show the birds clearly, but frustrating for the photographer, as cameras give either silhouettes or simply dark blobs in the trees! Occasionally a guan will sit out in the open, down low enough to photograph, or even come down on the ground in search of fallen fruit or for a dust bath. It seems a pity that one must either go to a national park, or hike for days, in order to see and enjoy these noisy, entertaining inhabitants of the rainforest. •

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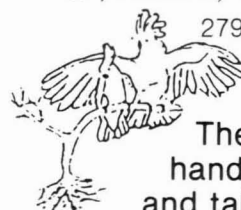
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