

The Cracidae – Chachalacas, Guans and Curassows

The *Cracidae* or cracids are a bird family group of ancient origin going back perhaps some 50 million years and currently inhabiting parts of South and Central America. The Craci are a sub-order of the **Galliformes** which also contains most of the best known game birds in the sub-order the Phasiani such as pheasants, grouse, guinea fowls, and quails. The other members of the Craci comprise the megapodes of Australasia.

Cracids are mostly arboreal (tree-dwelling) species which typically inhabit forest environments and thus their biology and habits are not well known. There is a good deal of debate on how many species the family comprise but there are some 40 – 50 currently extant.

Curassows are the largest in size of the birds in this group with measurements generally in the 70-80 cm range; Guans are slightly smaller (+/- 60cm) and Chachalacas the smallest in the group at +/- 50 cm. Chachalacas are all rather similar in appearance



Plain Chachalaca *Ortalis vetula*



Chaco Chachalaca *Ortalis canicollis*

Cracids appear to be monogamous and make a rather flat rudimentary nest of sticks with two to four plain white or cream eggs being laid depending on the species; the eggs are quite large relative to the size of the bird although the nests tend to be relatively small.



Little Chachalaca *Ortalis motmot*



Rufous-vented Chachalaca
Ortalis ruficauda

All cracids are typically vegetarian eating fruits, seeds, flowers, buds and leaves but limited evidence shows that some animal matter, especially insects such as grasshoppers are taken.

Most cracids are highly vocal and their calls can carry a considerable distance. Although diurnal, they will often call before dawn and after sunset. The songs of all Chachalacas are similar and the calls of a pair may well be joined by others in a chorus; the name Chachalaca is, as might be expected, onomatopoeic. Guans also, produce a diverse range of grunts, growls, cackles and yelps and the hoarse notes of Spix's Guan (*Penelope jacquacu*) has been considered to be one of the loudest and most far-reaching of any bird. Additionally, Guans are renowned for their wing-drumming which is probably related to courtship. Conversely to these noisy members of the family, Curassows tend to produce a low-pitched ventriloquial booming sound equated to the sound of blowing across the top of an empty bottle.



Horned Guan *Oreophasis derbianus*



Highland Guan *Penelope nigra*



Spix's Guan
Penelope jacquacu



Nocturnal Curassow
Nothocrax urumutum



Great Curassow
Crax rubra

Cracids have always been well-known to humans and Mayan remains bear witness to this. They have been sought both for their feathers (especially fletches for arrows) and meat and have been kept in captivity for centuries. Early exports to Europe via the island of Curacao gave rise to the name Curassow although the birds are not found on this island in the wild. Some species of Curassows and Guans are threatened or endangered largely from habitat loss but Chachalacas are more secure as they inhabit relatively more open territory.

Thanks as always to the Handbook of the Birds of the World for much of this information.

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