

Jamaica – The Doctor Bird (*Trochilus polytmus*)¹

Introduction



Source: <http://www.birdtheme.org/>

Stamp Issued in 1956 (part of definitive series)

“(Author: Ian Fleming, For Your Eyes Only, Publisher 1960 Jonathan Cape Limited)”

The most beautiful bird in Jamaica and some say the most beautiful in the world, is the streamer-tail or doctor humming-bird. The cock bird is about nine inches long, but seven inches of it are tail- two long black feathers that curve and cross each other and whose inner edges are in form of a scalloped design. The head and crest are black, the wings dark green, the long bill is scarlet and the eyes, bright and confiding, are black. The body is emerald green, so dazzling that when the sun is on the breast you see the brightest green thing in nature. In Jamaica, birds that are loved are given nicknames. Trochilus polytmus is called “doctor bird” because his two black streamers remind people of the black tail-coat of the old-time physician.”²

This colourful opening to a book that sadly, I had never read until now, led me to research this particular bird. According to the Jamaica Information Service (JIS)³, not only is the Doctor Bird a national symbol of Jamaica, they also suggest that it is one of the most outstanding of the 320 species of humming-bird. The JIS also states:

“These birds’ beautiful feathers have no counterpart in the entire bird population and they produce iridescent colours characteristic only of that family. In addition to these beautiful feathers, the mature male has two long tails which stream behind him when he flies. For years the doctor bird has been immortalized in Jamaican folklore and song.”

To an extent, the JIS also confirms the description of the origins of the nickname, referred to by Ian Fleming, but JIS also suggests that there are other schools of thought as to the reasons for the

¹ Also known as: The Swallow-tail Hummingbird; The Red Billed Streamer-tail Hummingbird; The Scissors-tail Hummingbird; or the Swallow-Streamer.

² Source: Opening paragraph of “For Your Eyes Only” by Ian Fleming, the second in five short stories featuring James Bond, brought together in one volume (title also “For Your Eyes Only”) first published in 1960 by Jonathan Cape Limited. Text is from the Pan paperback edition, 4th printing 1963.

³ <https://jis.gov.jm/information/symbols/jamaican-national-bird-the-doctor-bird/>

“doctor” nickname, citing one alternative explanation: the medical reference owing its origin to the way the birds lance the flowers with their bills to extract nectar, the long red bill resembling a syringe.

Also, according to the JIS, the Jamaican born lexicographer Frederic G Cassidy⁴, a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin and an expert on (amongst other things) Jamaican English and Creole, the Doctor Bird (was) is a bird that is the subject of superstition. The JIS states that this superstition was based on the beliefs of the Indigenous Caribbean population, who consider that the Doctor Bird has magical powers. There is also the belief that the Doctor Bird is the reincarnation of dead souls and hence is called the “God Bird”. In Jamaican folklore, the Doctor Bird is a clever bird and cannot be easily killed.

Where can the Doctor Bird Be found and what do they eat?

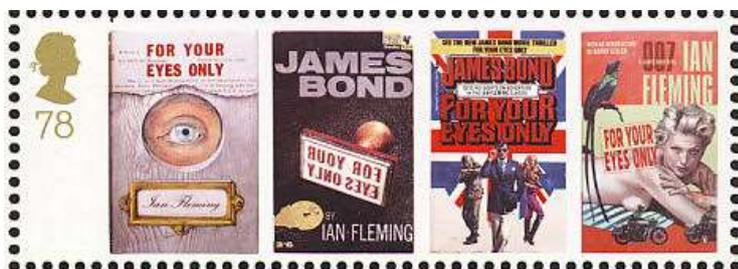
The Doctor Bird can only be found on Jamaica.

As indicated by Ian Fleming, the Doctor Birds feeds on nectar, which is their main source of food. However, they also eat spiders and other insects. They feed throughout the day and rest at night to conserve energy.⁵

The Birdlife Data Zone has surprisingly very little information on the Doctor Bird, other than to say that it is classified as “Least Concern” (LC) because the population size does not approach vulnerable status. That said, there is no data on the population size and the comment in the Data Zone text refers to the Doctor Bird as being common. Given that the Doctor Bird can only be found in one relatively small geographical location, it is surprising that there is no complementary “warning flag” classification to go alongside the “LC” classification, perhaps to reflect the vulnerability of the Doctor Bird to (for example) natural disaster as well as human predation.

The Doctor Bird on Stamps

The Doctor Bird has featured on several stamps from Jamaica, as well as on one or two others from other postal authorities. Amongst the latter category is the 2008 stamp issued by Royal Mail, to commemorate the birth centenary of Ian Fleming. One of the two 78p values included covers from the “For Your Eyes Only” paperbacks and one of these includes a Doctor Bird:



Source: www.birdtheme.org

⁴ Born 10 October 1907, died 14 June 2000 aged 92. Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/15/arts/frederic-cassidy-92-expert-on-american-folk-language-dies.html>

⁵ Source: <https://www.jamaica-land-we-love.com/jamaican-doctor-bird.html>

8 January 2008: The Royal Mail stamp includes a paperback cover that features the Doctor Bird. This may well be the Penguin Books (Viking Literary Fiction) 2006 Edition.

Interestingly, the beauty of the Doctor Bird must have made an impression with Ian Fleming, as this bird is now part of the logo adopted for the website of Ian Fleming Publications Limited and the Ian Fleming Estate. See: <https://www.ianfleming.com/about-us/>

The Doctor Bird has understandably, featured on three other Jamaican stamps:



Source: <http://www.bird-stamps.org/species/81125.htm>

These three stamps date respective from 1964, 1980 and 2004.

Other postal authorities have also issued stamps that illustrate the Doctor Bird. These include islands in the Caribbean:



Source: www.birdtheme.org

Other than Great Britain, I have not included here the stamps from territories outside of the Caribbean, notably the issues from Togo and Mali.