

## *Milvago chimachima* (Yellow-headed Caracara)

Family: Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras)

Order: Falconiformes (Diurnal Birds of Prey)

Class: Aves (Birds)



**Fig.1.** Yellow-headed caracara, *Milvago chimachima*.

[[http://www.avesderapinabrasil.com/milvago\\_chimachima.html](http://www.avesderapinabrasil.com/milvago_chimachima.html), downloaded 30 October 2015]

**TRAITS.** The head, neck and breast are creamy white, and the back and wings are dark brown (Fig. 1). The top of the crown is slightly streaked, and it has a narrow brown postocular (behind the eye) stripe. The wing and tail feathers are edged pale, and the bases of the primary feathers are mottled white and black, showing a prominent wing patch when in flight. The iris of the eye is a red-brown colour, and there is a bare shiny yellow orbital area (around the eye). The bill is a light blue, and the legs are pea green (Blake, 1977). The juvenile is streaked with brown on the throat and breast (Blake, 1977; Avise, 2011; Neotropical Birds, 2015) (Fig. 4). They range from 41-46cm in length, and weigh an average of 325g; males 280-330g and females 310-360g (Anderson, 1994). Other than their size, there is no sexual dimorphism between the male and female.

**ECOLOGY.** These birds are found in tropical and subtropical zones in semi-open country, such as grazing districts, scrub forests and savannas (Blake, 1977). *Milvago chimachima* is found in the tropics of the Caribbean, Central and South America (Fig. 3), including Trinidad and Tobago (Bird Life International, 2015).

**FORAGING BEHAVIOUR.** Commonly found at the top of trees or at roadsides, in pastures or on riverbanks, patrolling areas for carcasses. *Milvago chimachima* scavenges carrion and almost any edible plant or animal matter including insects, bird nestlings, snakes, lizards and mice. They would ride the backs of cattle and capybaras to watch for prey that would be disturbed by their activities. They feed not only on adult insects but also on pupae and larvae of Lepidoptera, Diptera and Orthoptera, and on oil palm fruits and coconut flesh as they are omnivores (Blake, 1977). They also feed on ticks and parasites of capybaras and cattle when on their backs, as can be seen in Fig. 4 (Ridgely and Gwynne, 1989). Sometimes they can pressure vultures away from their food and take whatever they want. They have learned that the highways are a good source of food and patrol for animals being killed by vehicles (Austin and Zima, 2015).

**COMMUNICATION.** They make loud, unpleasant scratchy-sounding screams descending in pitch (represented as Screeeeee), and a Kraa-Kraa-Kraa sound (Hilty et al., 2015).

**SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR.** A pair makes their nest as an open cup of sticks within the top of a tree. When displaying during the breeding season, many species of caracaras throw their heads back and call loudly in apparent advertisement. Caracaras typically lay a set of 2-3 eggs per nest, with the egg marked brown. They would nest close together but in separate nests during their breeding season (Warren and Genevieve Garst Photographic Collection, 2015).

**JUVENILE BEHAVIOUR.** The adult *M. chimachima* would teach the juveniles how to perform certain ways such as hunting, grooming where it would be normally done perched on the ground. The adult would move to a place where there is sand and use a vocalization call making the juveniles come to that area. Then the adult would proceed to have a sand bath. This behaviour of the sand bath would then be performed by the juveniles. This is grooming behaviour done to get rid of the parasites on them (Masis et al., 2014).

**ANTI-PREDATOR BEHAVIOUR.** There is little information on the anti-predator behaviour of the *Milvago chimachima*. As a predator it is more likely to compete than be eaten. It is known that they can pressure vultures away from food. This is known as mobbing (Curio, 1978).

## REFERENCES

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**Fig. 2.** Juvenile (left) and adult (right) *Milvago chimachima* on a tree branch.

[<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/yellow-headed-caracara-milvago-chimachima/juvenile-adult-tree/>, downloaded 6 November 2015]



**Fig. 3.** Distribution range of *Milvago chimachima*, in green.

[<http://www.hbw.com/species/yellow-headed-caracara-milvago-chimachima/>, downloaded 6 November 2015]



**Fig. 4.** *Milvago chimachima* taking ticks from a capybara.

[<http://ibc.lynxeds.com/photo/yellow-headed-caracara-milvago-chimachima/postjuvenal-picks-ticks-posing-capybara-hydrochoerus/>, downloaded 6 November 2015]