

SUMMARY

The **Barbados Bullfinch**, often called "Sparrow" or "Sparky" is the island's only truly endemic bird – meaning you won't find it anywhere else in the world. These small, dark olive-grey birds have stout, conical black beak and are incredibly common and adaptable. You'll often spot them hopping around gardens, hotel grounds, and even inside buildings looking for food, snacks or even drinks! Sparkys are known for being quite bold and clever, sometimes even figuring out how to open sugar packets. The next time you are close to a Sparky, do not feed it. Instead listen for its twittering calls and remember how truly unique this bird is.

Barbados Bullfinch (*Loxigilla barbadensis* Cory, 1886)

Family: Thraupidae (Tanagers)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Barbados Bullfinch, (*Loxigilla barbadensis*)

SPECIES CHARACTERISTICS

Formerly considered a subspecies of the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*), the Barbados Bullfinch (*Loxigilla barbadensis*) was elevated to a full species in 2006 (Buckley & Buckley, 2004). It is the only bird species endemic to the island of Barbados, where it is known locally as "Sparrow" or "Sparky." The bird is small and stocky, measuring approximately 14–15 cm in length (BirdsCaribbean, 2025).

A key characteristic of the species is its sexual monochromatism, meaning both males and females share the same subdued plumage. This lack of distinct male coloration is a primary reason for its classification as a separate species (Buckley & Buckley, 2004). The appearance is characterized by dark olive-grey upperparts, brownish wings, and greyish underparts, with contrasting tawny or rufous undertail coverts (Flieg, 2017).

EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY AND GENETICS

The evolution of the Barbados Bullfinch is a notable example of rapid speciation. Its split from the closely related Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*L. noctis*) is relatively recent in evolutionary terms (Audet, Ducatez, & Lefebvre, 2014; Buckley & Buckley, 2004; Cézilly, Daniel, & Massiah, 2013). The most significant evolutionary change is the loss of sexual dichromatism. While the male Lesser Antillean Bullfinch has striking black plumage with a red throat, the male Barbados Bullfinch shares the same dull, brownish-olive coloration as the female (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). Researchers theorize that this monochromatic state is a derived trait, meaning the species evolved from a dichromatic ancestor (Buckley & Buckley, 2004). This hypothesis is supported by a rare observation of a male *L. barbadensis* that exhibited a reddish throat patch, similar to its *L. noctis* relatives, suggesting a genetic link to this ancestral coloration (Audet et al., 2014).

HABITAT AND DISTRIBUTION

The Barbados Bullfinch is found exclusively on the island of Barbados. Its natural habitats include a range of forested and open environments, such as forest undergrowth, shrublands, and mangrove vegetation (Raffaele, Wiley, Garrido, Keith, & Raffaele, 2020). The species has shown remarkable adaptability and has become widespread across the island, thriving in human-altered environments (Arneaud, 2025). The species is a common sight in many backyards, gardens, hotel grounds, agricultural areas, and even bustling urban areas (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). This adaptability has allowed it to maintain a stable population, comfortable in close proximity to human activity (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). Interestingly, some urban bullfinches are bolder and possess superior problem-solving skills compared to their rural counterparts (Arneaud, 2025).

BEHAVIOUR

The behaviour of the Barbados Bullfinch is characterized by its adaptability, intelligence, and in some cases, its unusual tameness around humans. As a diurnal species, it is active throughout the day.

Foraging and Diet- The diet of the Barbados Bullfinch is highly varied and flexible, and the bird plays a role in the ecosystem as a seed disperser and pollinator. It is primarily a seedeater but also consumes fruits, berries, drupes, and nectar. Its diet often shifts with seasonal availability, consuming more insects during wetter periods (Arneaud, 2025). On rainy days, Bullfinches have been observed shifting its foraging techniques to catch insects in mid-air, behaving much like a flycatcher (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). The most notable feature of its foraging is its innovative problem-solving ability in urban environments. Bullfinches have famously learned to open sugar packets at outdoor cafes, a behaviour that was first observed in 2000 and has since persisted and spread (Reader, Nover, & Lefebvre, 2002). Research has shown that this innovation likely emerged independently in different locations on the island and has even been observed in the sister species, the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*), on other islands (Ducatez, Audet, & Lefebvre, 2013).

Social Dynamics and Communication- Barbados Bullfinches are generally considered to be territorial; especially during the breeding season (Raffaele et al., 2020). Outside of this period, they may be seen foraging in small flocks (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). Communication consists of a variety of sounds used to interact with mates, defend territory, and signal alarm (Reader et al., 2002). Their vocalizations range from rapid, high-pitched "tse tse tse tse" calls to harsher "schipp-schipp-schipp" sounds and a drawn-out, sharp trill (BirdsCaribbean, 2025).

Reproduction and Nesting- The Barbados Bullfinch is believed to be monogamous, with pairs forming for the breeding season (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). Both the male and female participate in building of a distinct globular nest with a side entrance. Nests are constructed from woven grasses, leaves, and other available materials and are typically placed in a tree or shrub, though they have also adapted to using man-made structures (Raffaele et al., 2020). The female lays a clutch of three to four spotted eggs, which hatch after an incubation period of approximately 14-days (BirdsCaribbean, 2025).

Juvenile Development- Juveniles have plumage similar to the adults, however, appearing in shades of brown (Arneaud, 2025). Similar to other passerines, which are birds that typically perch or sit stationary, the young are altricial, meaning they are born helpless and require significant parental care. They are fed by both parents in the nest until they are old enough to fledge (approximately two weeks). Once they leave the nest, they will follow the parents for a period, learning to forage for themselves (Bird, 1983).

Anti-Predator Responses- Despite their abundance, Barbados Bullfinches face threats from several predators, most of which are introduced species. These include feral and domestic cats, the Indian Mongoose, and African Green Monkeys (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). They are also subject to brood parasitism from the Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*), where a cowbird lays its eggs in the bullfinch's nest (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). The bullfinch's general boldness and tameness around humans may make it more vulnerable to predation in certain situations (such as open areas, close to cats). However, its high reproductive rate and ability to thrive in varied habitats have allowed its population to remain stable.

INTERACTIONS WITH HUMANS

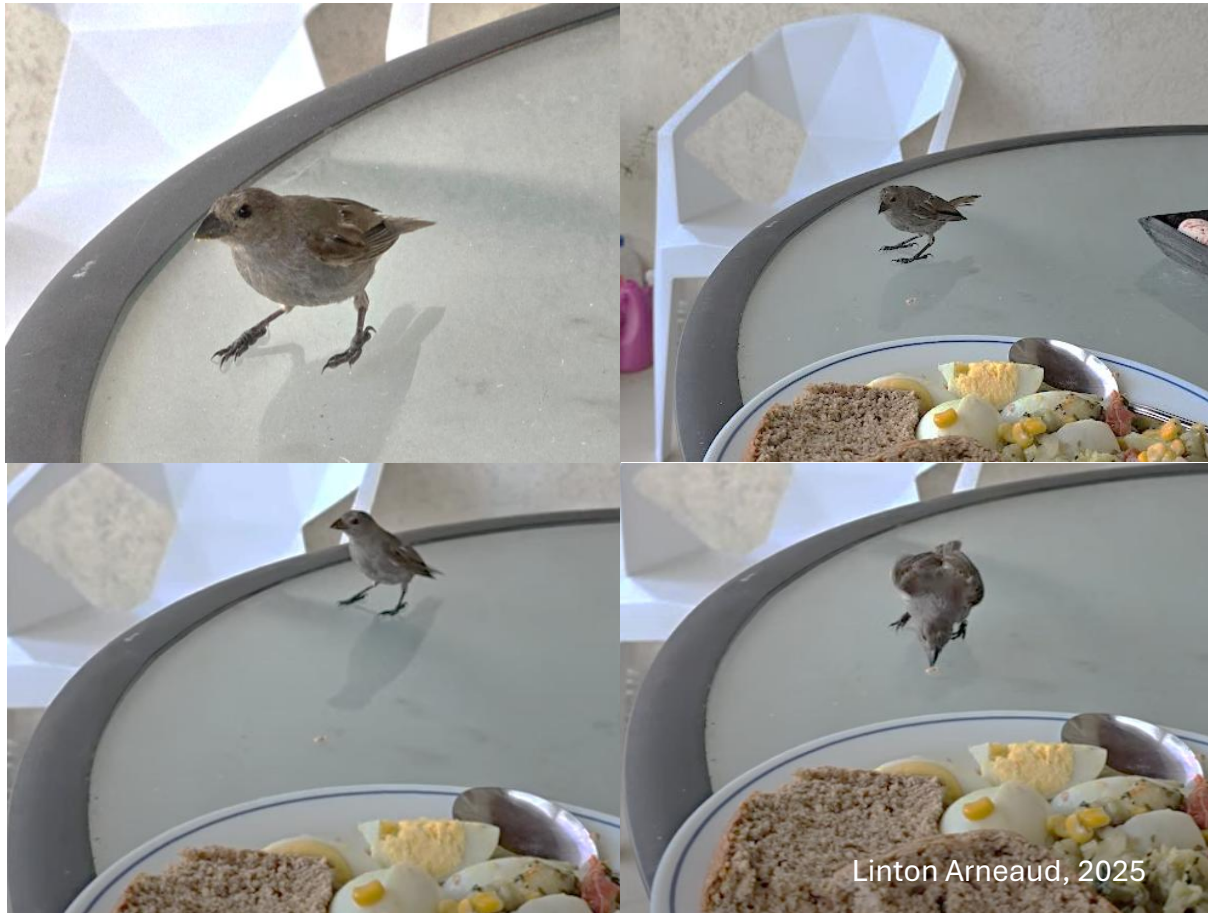
The Barbados Bullfinch has developed a unique and intimate relationship with the human inhabitants of the island. Its remarkable tameness means it is a constant presence in daily life, often seen hopping on outdoor tables at restaurants and hotels (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). This boldness has made it a favourite among tourists and a familiar backyard companion for locals. The species has become a minor tourist attraction in its own right, with many visitors delighting in hand-feeding the birds or watching their clever antics. However, their habit of pilfering (stealing) snacks, food and even drinks, can also cause them to be viewed as pests in some commercial establishments (Arneaud, 2025; Ducatez et al., 2013). Additionally, their droppings can become a health concern over time.

CONSERVATION STATUS AND THREATS

According to the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the Barbados Bullfinch is listed as a species of "Least Concern" (IUCN, 2016). This status reflects its large, stable population and its successful adaptation to a wide range of habitats, including heavily urbanized areas (Arneaud, 2025). The species is not considered to be under any immediate threat of extinction. Nonetheless, potential long-term threats exist, including habitat loss due to construction and development (Arneaud, 2025), as well as continued pressure from the introduced predators and brood parasites mentioned previously (BirdsCaribbean, 2025). Ongoing monitoring is advisable to ensure the continued health of this unique endemic species.

REFERENCES

- Arneaud, L. (2025). Barbados' Overlooked Endemic: The Bullfinch. Retrieved July 12, 2025, from <https://www.cavehill.uwi.edu/fst/bcs/resources/endemics/>
- Audet, J.-N., Ducatez, S., & Lefebvre, L. (2014). Morphological and molecular sexing of the monochromatic Barbados bullfinch, *Loxigilla barbadensis*. *Zoological science*, 31(10), 687–691. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2108/zs140025>
- Bird, J. R. (1983). *Behavioral and ecological comparisons of Lesser Antillean Bullfinches: a study of the evolution of sexual dimorphism and monomorphism (Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Vincent)*. (PhD Thesis), University of Montana.
- BirdsCaribbean. (2025). From the Nest – Day 166. Retrieved July 17, 2025, from <https://www.birdscaribbean.org/tag/barbados-bullfinch/>
- Buckley, P., & Buckley, F. (2004). Rapid speciation by a Lesser Antillean endemic, Barbados bullfinch *Loxigilla barbadensis*. *Bulletin British Ornithologists Club*, 124, 108–123.
- Cézilly, F., Daniel, C., & Massiah, E. B. (2013). A rare observation of a male Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*) on Barbados. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology*, 26, 59–62. <https://hal.science/hal-01074126v1>
- Ducatez, S., Audet, J., & Lefebvre, L. (2013). Independent appearance of an innovative feeding behaviour in Antillean bullfinches. *Animal Cognition*, 16(3), 525–529. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-013-0612-4>
- Flieg, G. M. (2017). *Birds of the West Indies*: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- IUCN. (2016). The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Barbados Bullfinch (*Loxigilla barbadensis*). Retrieved July 02, 2025, from <https://www.iucnredlist.org/species/22734682/95094761>
- Raffaele, H. A., Wiley, J., Garrido, O. H., Keith, A., & Raffaele, J. I. (2020). *Birds of the West Indies Second Edition* (Vol. 125): Princeton University Press.
- Reader, S. M., Nover, D., & Lefebvre, L. (2002). Locale-specific sugar packet opening by Lesser Antillean Bullfinches in Barbados. *Journal of Field Ornithology*, 73(1), 82–85. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1648/0273-8570-73.1.82>



Did You Know? Some Barbados Bullfinches are so comfortable around people, they'll boldly eat right out of your hand and even sing to get your attention for a tasty treat!

Authors: Linton Arneaud¹, and Julian Moore²

¹ The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus
Faculty of Science and Technology
Department of Biological and Chemical Sciences

² Blogmaster, Birds of Barbados (BirdsCaribbean)
Bridgetown, Barbados

17th July, 2025
