

species spotlight: **Blue-crowned Motmot**

by Mark Bremer, Co-Manager of Animal Programs

The Blue-crowned Motmot is an elegant rainforest dweller common throughout Central and South America. Motmots, relatives of the kingfishers and bee-eaters, hunt in the darkest, densest corners of the jungle, and produce the mysterious “hoot-hoot” vocalizations that are a familiar sound of the diurnal tropical rainforest.

The motmots, which are known for their striking calls and unique racquet-shaped tails, have been closely linked to human civilizations dating back to pre-Columbian eras. Scientists once believed the motmots produced their racquet-tails deliberately by removing the feather barbs of new tail feathers. However, the truth is that the barbs surrounding the feather tip are weakly attached, predisposing each barb to wear and tear. The gap in the tail is quickly



Blue-crowned Motmot

Momatus momata

Status:

Not threatened

Range:

Central and South America

Habitat:

Primary and Secondary Tropical Rainforest

Diet:

Fruit, mammals, birds and insects

Photo by Tom Pavlesch

formed in the course of preening and flying. Brazilian Amerindian tribes, who rely on slash-and-burn agriculture for crop production, see the motmot as

their ally. They explain that the gap in the motmot’s tail is burned as the bird carries hot embers on its tail to assist in spreading their fires!

Blue-crowned Motmots in captivity are easy to feed and difficult to breed. Motmots are omnivores, eating a variety of fruits, mammals, birds and insects. Motmots at the National Aviary are fed live *Anolis* lizards, super mealworms, wax worms and smelts, in addition to their chopped mixed fruit diets. Like their kingfisher relatives, wild motmots excavate deep, narrow nest burrows in earthen banks. These

nests are difficult to find, and have an entrance wider than it is high, leading to a deep tunnel that ends with a dark, cozy chamber. In captivity, aviculturists experiment with wooden boxes with long tunneling corridors that are filled with clay and are placed near the ground. These boxes permit motmots to perform their natural excavation behaviors, and have resulted in the successful rearing of captive motmots. Motmots make wonderful birds to add to a mixed free-flight aviary; however, one must remain vigilant and provide live food to prevent them from hunting the smaller aviary birds they live with.

Remember to bring a pair of binoculars and a camera when you visit the National Aviary’s Wetlands of the Americas exhibit! The motmot’s colors show extremely well on film, and they can be surprisingly approachable. And don’t forget to look for the striking similarities the motmots share with the Aviary’s kingfisher and bee-eater species, too.



The Aviary’s female motmot shows off her tail.

Photo by Daniel V. Klein