

CREATURE FEATURE

snake bird

by Cyril Brass



A Snake Bird, A Water Turkey, A Darter.

It's always exciting and rewarding to go on a wildlife excursion into the tropical jungles of Costa Rica. This was the case as I traveled into the coastal rainforest on a flat-bottomed boat along an infinite maze of meandering channels and streams of the Tortuguero National Park in Costa Rica. The encroaching trees and marshes in this inter-connected water highway provide ideal habitats for many species of birds like the egret, heron and kingfisher. But what about a Snake Bird, a Water Turkey and a Darter? These are some commonly used names for the large black aquatic bird, the Anhinga.

A relative to the Cormorant and Pelican, the Anhinga possesses several unique characteristics, resulting in these unusual titles given to it.

Unlike most waterfowl, which swim on top of the water, the Anhinga swims in the water with only its long neck and thin head visible above the surface. It stretches its head and neck flat on the water surface, giving the appearance of a snake gliding through the water. Thus given the name Snake Bird.

The Anhinga has no oil glands therefore its feathers are not waterproof like ducks and other waterfowl. After being in the water for some time, the Anhinga will get waterlogged causing it to be less and less buoyant. Eventually, it must stand in the sun for long periods with its wings spread out to allow the feathers to dry. This is the most identifiable characteristic of the Anhinga. Seeing a large black bird perched on a branch, I knew it was an Anhinga. It was very impressive to see this large aquatic bird up close. As we quietly floated along the water, several Anhingas were perched on low-lying branches

waiting for their feathers to dry. If the Anhinga must escape from potential danger, while drying out its plumage, it is still able to fly but with more difficulty and effort. With no insulating layer of feathers on its body, it loses body heat quickly while in the water. As well as drying out the feathers, the hot sunshine is essential to maintain its body temperature. On a cloudy day the Anhinga is not as active due to lack of sunshine and heat. As it absorbs the sun's rays with wings spread open, you can notice the long fanned-out tail similar to a turkey's tail. Thus given the name Water Turkey.

But what appears to be a disadvantage to the Anhinga can also be used to its benefit. Without the oily covered feathers, the wet feathers actually help the Anhinga dive and stalk its prey underwater for long periods of time. I have watched this skillful diver plunge deep into the waters, wondering where and when it would reappear. With its long neck, it quickly strikes out, spearing the fish with a lightning fast jab of its long serrated beak; like an arrow hitting the target. The S-shaped neck allows for a more accelerated strike towards its prey. Thus it is given the name Darter. Eventually the snake-like neck and head pop back above the surface in a far off unsuspecting direction. A flick of its bill and the fish flies into the air and is gulped down headfirst.

The habitats of the Anhinga must have consistent amounts of sunshine and hot temperatures

year round. As well, being a water bird, the Anhinga needs to be close to slow moving bodies of water like streams, lakes, swamps and lagoons. The Tortuguero National Park in Costa Rica is an ideal environment for the Anhinga as well as many other waterfowl species, as the dense forest borders the connecting canals, streams and lagoons.

The Anhinga does not hang out in large flocks, but is mostly a solitary bird when hunting, resting and drying out, however it can be seen with other wetland birds like herons. These graceful fliers soar high in the sky like hawks and vultures. With outstretched wings, they travel long distances without flapping their wings, riding the warm air currents overhead.

The Anhinga... a Snakebird, Water Turkey, Darter ... a skillful diver and hunter. [ca](http://www.cyrilbrass.com)

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