

THE ROLE OF THE NON-PROFESSIONAL IN CARIBBEAN AND BERMUDAN ORNITHOLOGY

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Abstract.—The millions of amateur birders worldwide provide a resource that is invaluable in all fields of conservation and research. Non-professionals write field guides, assist scientists in the field, organize bird clubs, lead field trips, conduct public education forums, and generally assist in environmental issues. With minimal training, they can be invaluable in doing research and recording data.

Key words: amateur, conservation, field guides, public education, training, volunteers

Resumen.—EL PAPEL DEL NO PROFESIONAL EN LA ORNITOLOGÍA CARIBEÑA. Los millones de observadores de aves aficionados en todo el mundo proveen un recurso inestimable en todos los campos de la conservación y la investigación. Personas no profesionales escriben guías de campo, ayudan a científicos en el campo, realizan foros de educación pública, y ayudan en otros asuntos ambientales. Con una capacitación mínima, pueden resultar inestimables a la hora de efectuar investigaciones y recopilar datos.

Palabras clave: aficionado, conservación, guías de campo, educación pública, capacitación, voluntarios

Résumé.—LE RÔLE DES NON PROFESSIONNELS EN ORNITHOLOGIE CARAÏBE. Les millions d'amateurs ornithologues du monde entier sont une source d'information de valeur dans tous les domaines de la recherche et de la conservation. Des non professionnels écrivent des guides de terrain, appuient les scientifiques, organisent des clubs, dirigent des sorties de terrain, conduisent des forums publics de formation et participent de manière générale aux questions sur l'environnement. Avec une formation minimale, ils peuvent être de grande valeur dans les actions de recherche et de collectes de données.

Mots-clés: amateur, conservation, guides de terrain, éducation du public, formation, bénévoles

ON RESEARCHING MATERIAL for this topic, it became evident quickly that many non-professionals throughout the Caribbean are making substantial contributions to ornithology. Some examples of this include fund-raising, education, writing field guides, conducting bird counts, assisting with scientific research, and forming bird clubs. We will highlight some of these examples here, from the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Bahamas, Antigua, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, and Puerto Rico.

Dominican Republic

The first and possibly best-documented example is Annabelle Dod, whose work in the Dominican Republic is legendary. She and her husband, Donald, went to the Dominican Republic in 1964 to work through the Evangelical Church in family planning and other social programs. They were amateur naturalists and welcomed the opportunity to explore the countryside in their spare time. Their professional and amateur interests merged with the problems they found waiting for them. Not only was the local population ignorant of family planning, it was also ignorant of the wildlife of the island and the concept of conservation. Annabelle Dod started a weekly column in a local newspaper speaking out

against the wanton destruction of birds and their habitats, and advocating measures for their conservation.

By 1977 Annabelle Dod's book, "Birds of the Dominican Republic," was published, giving the Dominican people a book in Spanish to learn about their own countryside. In 1981 she wrote a field guide to the birds of the Dominican Republic, again in Spanish, established a bird collection at the National Museum of Natural History and, with her husband and George Reynard, a crop scientist, finished the recording of local bird songs. Annabelle Dod found two birds new to science, two new resident species, and many migrant birds never before listed. The Dods accompanied scientists on many expeditions in the Dominican Republic, including David Wingate of Bermuda, to look for the nesting site of the Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hastata*) in the mountains of Hispaniola.

Several field assistants from Dr. Joe Wunderle's shade coffee investigations, who continue work in avian conservation and education, formed the Annabelle Dod Bird Club in 1995. The Club organized field trips and walks, sponsored courses, created educational projects, conducted bird counts, and

provided support for researchers. The Club hosted the Avian Conservation Conference in 1998 and the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds annual meeting in 1999. The new Hispaniola Ornithological Society continues this work.

A recent achievement is the publication of a new picture book, “Common birds of the Dominican Republic” in Spanish and English. The photographs and editing are the result of several years’ efforts by volunteers.

Jamaica

From Jamaica, we find amateurs very active. While maintaining her job as an airline ticket office supervisor, Audrey Downer studied Indigo Buntings in Jamaica from 1960 to 1972. She received some training from a professional in aging birds by plumage and molts, bird banding, and making study specimens. She continues to collect valuable data on birds and has trained other members of BirdLife Jamaica in banding and specimen preparation.

In the 1980s, spurred by a lack of good reference material for field identification, Audrey Downer and Robert Sutton, pen keeper and bird-tour leader, decided to produce a field guide to the birds of Jamaica, together with a local lawyer who provided the photographs. The book, published in 1990, was well reviewed in scientific journals and is cited frequently in papers written by professionals. The same team was working on a new field guide to replace the original book, now out of print, until Robert Sutton’s tragic death in the summer of 2002. Robert Sutton also teamed with George Reynard to complete sound recordings of the birds of Jamaica. Their “Bird songs in Jamaica” was published as compact disk and tape sets by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in 2000.

The Gosse Bird Club, named after Philip Henry Gosse, the first author of “Birds of Jamaica” one hundred years previously, was formed in 1963 by keen birders. Now renamed BirdLife Jamaica, members have made a substantial contribution to ornithology by publishing a *Broadsheet*. Three housewives were the first editors. Others making major contributions include a worker in the coconut industry and a doctor, none with professional training in ornithology. Major ornithological libraries of universities in the United States subscribe to the *Broadsheet* and it is often cited in scientific papers. Many people have been encouraged to develop an interest in the scientific study of birds through the *Broadsheet*.

Bahamas

In The Bahamas, the Ornithology Group was the brainchild of Sandra Buckner, Chairperson of the Wildlife Committee of the Bahamas National Trust and has been active since 1993, consisting of lawyers, homemakers, teachers, bankers, among others. Paul Dean, a retired airline employee whose birding skills are unrivaled, has made substantial contributions. Always ready to help others develop their skills in visual and auditory identification, he is largely responsible for the improved birding skills of the members of the group.

Tony White, a retired US naval officer whose recent book, “A birder’s guide to the Bahama Islands,” has assisted greatly in identifying birding “hot-spots” on all the Bahama Islands.

With the newly formed Ornithology Group, Alexander Sprunt, IV initiated Christmas Bird Counts on New Providence in 1994, which have continued annually. The Group hosted the annual meeting of the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds in Nassau in 1996. A homemaker and Society member, Aileen Bainton, has spent much time and effort compiling a bibliography of published papers on Bahamian birds. The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism has initiated a training program for birding tour guides on several islands of The Bahamas. The Bahamas National Trust has recently established a Birds Records Committee, which consists mainly of amateur birders. Local birders continue to support the West Indian Whistling-Duck (*Dendrocygna arborea*) and Wetlands Program in The Bahamas.

An example of amateur naturalists providing positive links to scientific research is that of the Bahamas National Trust Game Bird Committee, which has contributed time, effort, and personal funding to identify and protect important breeding areas of the White-crowned Pigeon (*Columba leucocephala*), by monitoring populations with an ongoing banding program. The Committee has also been instrumental in hunter education and paving the way for legislation to regulate hunting for sustainable use.

Another example of amateur involvement in The Bahamas is of the local Ornithology Group providing data to the government which were instrumental in protecting an important wetland as a new national park on the densely populated island of New Providence. The Group also plays a key role in the Important Bird Areas Program for the Bahamas, recently initiated by BirdLife International. Artist

Melissa Maura finds time to receive injured wild birds for rehabilitation and the Ornithology Group maintains a specimen collection, with some welcome assistance from scientists at the University of Florida.

In March 2002, the Bahamas Ornithology Group, on their spring field trip to Eleuthera, made a significant discovery of a small flock of Kirtland's Warblers (*Dendroica kirtlandii*). This highly endangered bird has always eluded experts in its wintering grounds in The Bahamas and the find of about eight of these birds in one small location was of great importance. The discovery of these birds on Eleuthera will enable further study by amateurs and professionals.

The Ornithology Group has benefited from the long-term involvement of Bahamian naturalists and researchers, and continues to move forward from strength-to-strength.

Antigua

In Antigua, a spin-off of efforts to save the critically endangered Antiguan racer snake (*Alsophis antiguae*) has benefited nesting colonies of seabirds. A major program is underway to restore habitats on nearby offshore islands through the eradication of invasive rats. Thanks to the efforts of various conservation partners and numerous volunteers, observations revealed that this program has benefited nesting seabirds over the past six years, including the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) among others. This has led to the development of a seabird survey and long-term monitoring project. A local biology teacher will be leading these investigations under the guidance of conservation partners and Caribbean seabird experts.

Bermuda

In Bermuda, conservation officers and staff have initiated some important bird conservation projects that have required the help of many volunteers. Artificial nest sites have been constructed on rocky ledges for White tailed Tropicbirds (*Phaethon lepturus*), a program of constructing and distributing nest boxes critical for the Bermuda Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*) was spearheaded and carried out by non-professionals, and much work has been done by volunteers in the removal of invasive plant species with replacement-planting of endemic flora to improve bird habitat.

Cayman Islands

From the Cayman Islands, Patricia Bradley, an amateur, published a field guide to the birds of the

three islands, as well as a British Ornithologists' Union Check-list and a comprehensive biogeographic treatment of the islands' avifauna.

Puerto Rico

From Puerto Rico comes another impressive story of non-professionals making a significant contribution to ornithology. The Puerto Rican Shorebird Network of the Puerto Rican Ornithological Society was created to monitor shorebird populations in the island, because these long-distance migrants were found to be declining in their breeding grounds. The program was initiated by a professional, Adrienne Tossas, as a result of her attending a Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds shorebird workshop in French Guiana. She has subsequently organized two workshops for about 30 amateurs to improve their shorebird identification skills and to encourage them to join the Shorebird Network. The project includes approximately 14 members who monthly survey shorebirds in 13 localities around Puerto Rico. New important data have emerged from this effort. Sergio Colón, an electrical technician in the pharmaceutical industry, visits the Tiburones Swamp Reserve almost every day after work. He has recorded two new species for the island and has compiled a list of more than 180 bird species in the Reserve. His list will be published and used by the managers of the Reserve. Colón has become sufficiently skilled in shorebird identification that professionals consult him frequently.

Other keen members of this project include an engineer, lawyer, architect, business people, and scientists in other fields. With their help, other important shorebird sites have emerged and the first breeding evidence in Puerto Rico of the Willet (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*), a migrant species, was found in 2002. The dedication of so many non-professionals will hopefully lead to more sites coming under protection and has already played a part in the prevention of development in some areas. The US Fish and Wildlife Service will be including these data in a special website of shorebird conservation programs and the data will also be used in the Important Bird Area project for the island.

CONCLUSIONS

Trained non-professionals offer non-government organizations, research biologists, and national conservation initiatives a work force that can make substantial contributions to resource protection in their countries. Birds are the most tangible non-marine life forms within the Caribbean islands and, thus, the most meaningful biodiversity component at a

local level. People can get excited about birds!

By illustrating the dedication of amateur birders around the greater Caribbean region, it is clear that non-professionals can and do indeed play a significant part in ornithology and provide an enormous reservoir of talent, enthusiasm, and energy.

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