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DISCOVERY OF THE CUBAN SPARROW (*TORREORNIS INEXPECTATA VARONAI*) ON CAYO RAMANO, SABANA–CAMAGUEY ARCHIPELAGO, CUBA

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Abstract: The threatened Cuban Sparrow (*Torreornis inexpectata*) represents one of seven endemic genera of the Cuban avifauna. Allopatric populations, each representing a distinctive subspecies, are found in three widely separated areas in western (Zapata Peninsula), central (Cayo Coco), and eastern Cuba (Baitiquirí-Imías). In March 2001, two individuals were observed near the bridge connecting Cayos Coco and Romano. Censuses with the aid of song playback were conducted on Cayo Romano during 9–10 January 2008, documenting the presence of at least six pairs.

Key words: Cayo Romano, Cuba, Cuban Sparrow, Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago, *Torreornis inexpectata*

Resumen: DESCUBRIMIENTO DEL CABRERITO DE LA CIÉNAGA (*TORREORNIS INEXPECTATA VARONAI*) EN CAYO ROMANO, ARCHIPIÉLAGO SABANA–CAMAGUEY, CUBA. El Cabrerito de la Ciénaga (*Torreornis inexpectata*), clasificado como En Peligro, constituye uno de los siete géneros endémicos de la avifauna cubana. La distribución de la especie es representada por tres poblaciones alopátricas, confinadas a tres áreas ampliamente separadas en el oeste (Ciénaga de Zapata), centro (Cayo Coco) y este de Cuba (Baitiquirí-Imías), las que a su vez representan tres razas diferentes. En marzo del 2001, el segundo autor observó dos individuos cerca del puente que une los cayos Coco y Romano. Durante el 9 y 10 de enero del 2008, se documentó con el auxilio del reclamo de canto el hallazgo de seis parejas.

Palabras clave: Archipiélago Sabana-Camaguey, Cabrerito de la Ciénaga, Cayo Romano, Cuba, *Torreornis inexpectata*

Résumé : DECOUVERTE DU BRUANT DE ZAPATA (*TORREORNIS INEXPECTATA VARONAI*) A CAYO RAMANO, ARCHIPEL DE SABANA–CAMAGUEY, CUBA. L'espèce très menacée, Bruant de Zapata (*Torreornis inexpectata*), représente un des sept genres endémiques de Cuba. Des populations allopatriques, chacune représentant une sous-espèce sont réparties dans 3 zones largement séparées dans l'ouest (Péninsule de Zapata), au centre (Cayo Coco), et à l'est de Cuba (Baitiquirí-Imías). En mars 2001, deux individus ont été observés à proximité du pont reliant Cayos Coco et Romano. Des recherches par utilisation de playback d'enregistrements ont été conduit à Cayo Romano les 9 et 10 janvier 2008, permettant de confirmer la présence d'au moins 6 couples.

Mots-clés : Archipel de Sabana-Camaguey, Bruant de Zapata, Cayo Romano, Cuba, *Torreornis inexpectata*

The Cuban Sparrow (*Torreornis inexpectata*) represents one of seven endemic avian genera in Cuba (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000), and it is currently considered an endangered species (BirdLife International 2008). The nominate race (*T. i. inexpectata*; Barbour and Peters 1927) was discovered in 1926 on the Zapata Peninsula, where it inhabits sawgrass-*Myrica* dominated swamps (Morton and González Alonso 1982). A second subspecies (*T. i. sigmani*; Spence and Smith 1961) was discovered in the environs of Baitiquirí, Guantánamo Province, in coastal scrub dominated by *Tournefortia gnaphalodes*, in one of the driest areas in Cuba. The third population (*T. i. varonai*; Regalado 1981) was discovered in semideciduous forest and thorn scrub on Cayo Coco (Garrido 1976). However, fossil evidence reveals a much wider distribution during the Pleistocene (González *et al*. 1986).

In March 2001, Eliser Socarrás Torres observed a pair of individuals on Cayo Romano, a new locality adjacent to the previously known population on Cayo Coco in the Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago. During 9–10 January 2008, we conducted 45 point counts using the tape-recorded playback method (Wunderle 1994). With the aid of a GPS unit, each plot was placed a minimum of 200 m apart in suitable habitat along the main road crossing Cayo Romano. Working from west to east, the first plot was placed in the westernmost location of the sampling area where suitable habitat was present. For eliciting vocal responses of birds, we used vocalizations of the species from the CD of Reynard and Garrido (2005). Our census was conducted during 0630-1100 on both days during clear weather.

On 9 January, five pairs of individuals responded persistently to playback in button mangrove (*Conocarpus erecta*) and coastal scrub patches with a ground cover dominated by halophyte vegetation

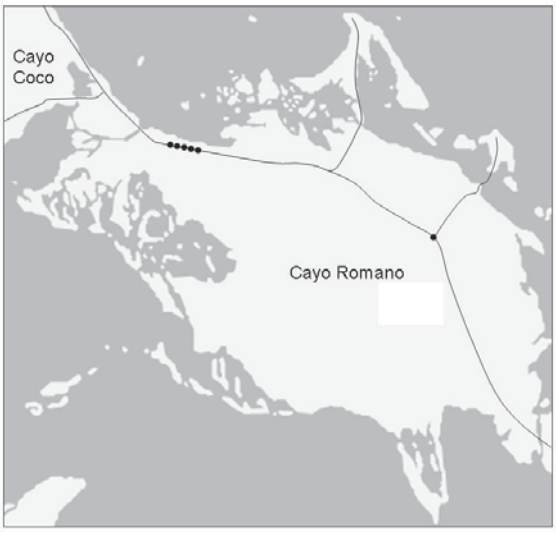

Fig. 1. Locations of Cuban Sparrow (*Torreornis inexpectata*) pairs detected at Cayo Romano, Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago, Cuba.

(*Sporobolus virginicus*). All five pairs were near the western end of the transect (Fig. 1). On 10 January another pair was detected at the edge of semideciduous forest farther east, about 17 km from the bridge connecting Cayos Coco and Romano (Fig. 1).

It is uncertain whether the Cuban Sparrow preexisted on Cayo Romano or recently colonized the island. Although there have been several bird surveys in Cayo Romano during the past 20 yr (Acosta and Berovides 1984, Kirkconnell and Posada 1988, Academia de Ciencias de Cuba / Instituto Cubano de Geodesia y Cartografía 1990, Shaffer *et al*. 2000, Rodríguez *et al*. 2006), none reported the Cuban Sparrow. However, the previous studies did not use playback methods which are clearly more suitable for detecting an elusive species with a low population density. Our findings validate the need for further surveys of Cuban Sparrow in the Sabana-Camaguey Archipelago, as suggested by González *et al*. (1986) and Garrido *et al*. (1986).

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