

FIVE NEW SPECIES OF BIRDS FOR ARUBA, WITH NOTES ON OTHER SIGNIFICANT SIGHTINGS

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Abstract: A trip to Aruba during mid-March 2005 produced five previously unrecorded species: Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor*), Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*), Greater Ani (*Crotophaga major*), Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*), and Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*). Three other species were recorded only once previously. These species were from a diverse set of families and widely differing geographical origins. Also found were a number of passerines generally considered rare to casual in the southern Caribbean Basin. Aruba's apparent attraction for such vagrants is not clear but may be related to its relatively westerly position and its scarce but easily accessible habitat increasing the observer's ability to find such birds.

Key words: Aruba, *Aythya collaris*, *Crotophaga major*, distributional records, *Fregata minor*, new bird species, *Passerina cyanea*, *Vireo olivaceus*

Resumen: CINCO NUEVAS ESPECIES PARA ARUBA Y NOTAS SOBRE OTROS AVISTAMIENTOS SIGNIFICATIVOS. Una expedición a Aruba a mediados de marzo del 2005 produjo cinco nuevos registros de especies: Fregata Grande (*Fregata minor*), Pato Cabezón (*Aythya collaris*), Greater Ani (*Crotophaga major*), Vireo de Ojo Rojo (*Vireo olivaceus*), y el Azulejo (*Passerina cyanea*). Otras tres especies habían sido reportadas solo una vez con anterioridad. Estas especies pertenecen a un grupo diverso de familias y de muy diferentes orígenes geográficos. También se encontró un cierto número de paserinas consideradas generalmente raras o casuales en el sur del Caribe. El atractivo aparente de Aruba para estos vagrants no está claro pero puede estar relacionado a su posición relativamente occidental y a sus dispersos, pero accesibles hábitats, que aumentan la probabilidad de los observadores de encontrar estas aves.

Palabras clave: Aruba, *Aythya collaris*, *Crotophaga major*, especies de aves nuevas, *Fregata minor*, nuevos reportes de especies, *Passerina cyanea*, reportes de distribución, *Vireo olivaceus*

Résumé : CINQ NOUVELLES ESPECES POUR ARUBA, AVEC DES NOTES SUR D'AUTRES OBSERVATIONS INTERESSANTES. Un voyage à Aruba mi mars 2005 a permis d'observer 5 espèces nouvelles : la Frégate du Pacifique (*Fregata minor*), le Fuligule à collier (*Aythya collaris*), l'Ani des palétuviers (*Crotophaga major*), le Viréo aux yeux rouges (*Vireo olivaceus*), et le Passerin indigo (*Passerina cyanea*). 3 autres espèces observées n'avaient été vues qu'une seule fois auparavant. Ces espèces étaient de diverses familles et d'origines géographiques très variées. D'autres espèces rares ou accidentelles dans le sud du bassin caraïbe ont aussi été notées. L'apparente attraction d'Aruba pour de tels erratiques n'est pas claire mais pourrait être liée à sa localisation relativement à l'ouest et par son habitat rare mais facilement accessible qui augmente les chances pour l'observateur de trouver de tels oiseaux.

Mots-clés : Aruba, *Aythya collaris*, *Crotophaga major*, distribution des observations, *Fregata minor*, nouvelles espèces d'oiseaux, *Passerina cyanea*, *Vireo olivaceus*

CASEY BEACHELL AND I explored Aruba from 12 to 18 March 2005, our third such visit. During this time, we repeatedly visited the Bubali Bird Sanctuary, Tierra del Sol Golf Course, Spanish Lagoon, and flooded saltflats near Malmok, discovering five species of birds previously unrecorded from Aruba plus three species detected only once previously. The Bubali Bird Sanctuary and the lake at Tierra del Sol Golf Course provide the only significant permanent freshwater habitat on this arid island. Bubali was created in 1972 to handle sewage outflow from the island's resorts and hotels. The resultant marsh is about 1 km long and 0.5 km wide, with most of the area covered by cattails (*Typha* spp.) and water lettuce (*Pistia stratiotes*). On the marsh's west

shore, there is a line of broadleaf trees with a canopy ranging mostly from 3-6 m in height. The golf course lake is Y-shaped and, when full, about 1 km long and 0.25 km wide. This lake provides muddy and grassy edges as well as a strip of *Typha* marsh. Presumably the level of the lake is dependent on run-off from the golf course and precipitation. Spanish Lagoon is a brackish 1 km cut into the island's interior and is the most prominent mangrove swamp on Aruba. Finally, towards the north side of the island, there is a series of salt pans that have water only if there has been sufficient recent rainfall, and Aruba's rainfall from September 2004 through January 2005 was substantially above normal Aruba (Meteorological Service Netherland Antilles and

Aruba 2004, 2005). During March 2005, almost all contained water fringed by muddy shoreline, but only the saltpan near Malmok was used regularly by shorebirds. Full descriptions of all birds reported herein are on file at the Zoological Museum of the University of Amsterdam.

FIRST RECORDS

GREAT FRIGATEBIRD (*FREGATA MINOR*)

On 15 March 2005 an adult female Great Frigatebird was seen at Cerro Colorado, the southeast cape of the island. It was observed for 4-5 min as close as 50 m. The shape of the belly patch, complete dark chest band, and limited white on axillars eliminated other frigatebird species (James 2004, D. J. James, *in litt*). Great Frigatebird has not been previously recorded on the Aruba, Bonaire, or Curaçao (the ABC Islands), Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago or the West Indies (Voous 1983, ffrench 1991, Hilty 2003). The Atlantic Ocean breeding population is limited to Trinidad Island and Martin Vas Rocks off Brazil (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). In the North Pacific, Great Frigatebirds breed as far north as Mexico's Islas Revillagigedo (Howell and Webb 1995) and have wandered as far north as the Farallon Islands, California (Richardson et al. 2003). Great Frigatebird has also been recorded once in the eastern United States in Oklahoma (Tomer et al. 1996).

RING-NECKED DUCK (*AYTHYA COLLARIS*)

On three occasions from 12-16 March 2005 we were able to study, at length, two female Ring-necked Ducks at the Tierra del Sol Golf Course. The distinctive head shape, bill pattern, and diagnostic facial pattern were easily seen. This species winters regularly as far south as the Virgin Islands, but in the Lesser Antilles it is found less than once per decade (Raffaele et al. 1998), and there are but three records from Venezuela (Hilty 2003). Reuter and Prins (in prep.) list three records from Curaçao, including eight together during 1999, and one from Bonaire. There have been several records from Trinidad and Tobago (e.g., ffrench 1991, Hayes and White 2000, White and Hayes 2002).

GREATER ANI (*CROTOPHAGA MAJOR*)

Near noon on 13 March 2005 at Spanish Lagoon we observed two large birds that landed above us giving a croak-like call. They were large, glossy black, and had exceptionally long tails. We watched the birds from about 10 m for 2-3 min before they

flew off. The distinctive bill shape and white eyes were readily apparent. Greater Ani had not previously been recorded on the ABC Islands nor the West Indies (Raffaele et al. 1998, Reuter and Prins, in prep.). In northern Venezuela, where fairly common from late April to November, they occur mostly as migrants from Amazonia but are also found in smaller numbers during the remainder of the year (Hilty 2003). Greater Anis are a fairly common resident in Trinidad and Tobago, where they inhabit mangrove swamps among other habitats (ffrench 1991).

RED-EYED VIREO (*VIREO OLIVACEUS*)

At Spanish Lagoon on 13 March 2005, we watched a vireo for approximately 4 min, observing the lack of a dusky "whisker" mark, bright red eyes, relatively bright green back, and strong facial pattern. Black-whiskered Vireo (*V. altiloquus*) was eliminated by the lack of a "whisker," the relatively bright green back, the stronger facial pattern, and the relatively smaller bill. Yellow-green Vireo (*V. flavoviridis*) would have had a larger bill, been more brightly colored, and lacked the dark upper border to the supercilium. It is surprising that this species had not been previously detected on Aruba, as migrant Red-eyed Vireos from North America are uncommon to fairly common in Venezuela (Hilty 2003), and there are at least six records from Bonaire and three from Curaçao (Voous 1983, Reuter and Prins in prep.). Its similarity to the resident Black-whiskered Vireo may partly explain the lack of previous records. Given this individual's bright red eyes, it was likely of the nominate North American race, rather than one of the South American races which have browner eyes (Hilty 2003).

INDIGO BUNTING (*PASSERINA CYANEA*)

A brown Indigo Bunting (likely an immature female) was noted 12 March 2005 in a weedy area bordering the sewage treatment plant at the Bubali Bird Sanctuary. Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor*) was easily eliminated by shape and lack of olive hues. The relatively dull brown color and lack of prominent wingbars eliminated Lazuli Bunting (*P. amoena*), and Blue-black Grassquit (*Volatinia jacarina*) would have been smaller with a sharper all black bill. In the West Indies Indigo Buntings are regular as far south as the Virgin Islands and San Andres, though they are rarely recorded in the Lesser Antilles (once in St. Martin, twice in Dominica, once in Barbados; McNair et al. 1999, Islam 2002, Brown 2005) and have been recorded but

once in Venezuela and once on Trinidad and Tobago (ffrench 1991, Hilty 2003). Surprisingly, there are multiple records from Bonaire and Curaçao, sometimes involving small flocks, from early November into late April (Voous 1983), and they are currently considered regular on Bonaire and Curaçao (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). The lack of pre-existing records from Aruba may well be due to relatively poor ornithological coverage.

SECOND RECORDS

LITTLE EGRET (*EGRETTA GARZETTA*)

An individual of this species was observed for 5 min at some distance, but in excellent light, from the observation tower at Bubali early in the morning of 12 March. The dark lores and two long filamentous head plumes without shaggy crest were noted. The bird associated with several Snowy Egrets (*E. thula*), the yellow lores of which were easily seen. An individual of this species allowed close study at Tierra del Sol Golf Course 25-30 March 2003, providing the ABC Islands' first record (Mlodinow 2004). This Old World species was first recorded in the Western Hemisphere at Barbados on 16 April 1954 (Bond 1966). Its numbers have increased dramatically in the Caribbean Basin since the 1980s, with breeding first noted at Barbados in 1994 and over 50 records from Trinidad and Tobago, mostly from January to April (Massiah 1996, Hayes and White 2001, Mlodinow *et al.* 2004). There are no records for Venezuela (Hilty 2003). The 12 March 2005 bird may well be the same one seen at Tierra del Sol two years earlier.

LIMPKIN (*ARAMUS GUARAUNA*)

On the evening of 12 March, we observed a Limpkin for 5-10 min as it stalked the lake's edge at Tierra del Sol. Eventually, it flew to the marshy portion of the lake, and we were unable to relocate it that day or on further visits. This distinctive bird lacked the white spots on the back typical of *A. g. dolosus* from North America, Central America, and the West Indies; rather, the pale streaking was limited to the head and neck, typical of the nominate race from South America. Some local movement occurs in northern Venezuela, where it is most common June to October (Hilty 2003). This species is an uncommon resident on Trinidad and Tobago (ffrench 1991). The only other record for the ABC Islands was from Ceru Colorado, Aruba, in February 1975 (Voous 1983, Reuter and Prins, in prep.).

PHILADELPHIA VIREO (*VIREO PHILADELPHICUS*)

Just after sunrise on 18 March, a vireo with a relatively small bill (when compared to Red-eyed or Black-whiskered) and bright yellow throat and chest approached within 3 m at Spanish Lagoon. It lacked wingbars and had a dark transocular stripe, a whitish supercilium, and a gray crown. A Tennessee Warbler (*Vermivora peregrina*) would have had a much finer bill, and would not have had the combination of yellow underparts and blue-gray cap or a bright yellow throat and chest. Red-eyed, Black-whiskered, and Yellow-green Vireo were eliminated by the solidly yellow throat and chest plus the relatively small bill. A Brown-capped Vireo (*V. leucophrys*) would have had a whiter throat, brown cap, and less distinct transocular stripe, while Warbling Vireo (*V. gilvus*) would also lack the solidly yellow throat and chest and would have had pale lores. Philadelphia Vireo is less than annual in the West Indies and is unrecorded from the Virgin Islands or Lesser Antilles (Raffaele *et al.* 1998). It has been recorded in South America only in Colombia (American Ornithologists' Union 1998) and there are two prior ABC Island records, one from Spanish Lagoon on 13 January 2002 (Wells and Wells 2004) and one on Curaçao in April 2000 (Wells and Wells 2001).

ADDITIONAL RECORDS OF NOTE

During our stay we also recorded a number of presumably unusual neotropical migrants, including 11 Northern Parulas (*Parula americana*), three Chestnut-sided Warblers (*Dendroica pensylvanica*), ten Cape May Warblers, a Black-throated Blue Warbler (*D. caerulescens*), nine Prothonotary Warblers (*Protonotaria citrea*), an Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*), a Louisiana Waterthrush (*Seiurus motacilla*), 13 Common Yellowthroats (*Geothlypis trichas*), and a Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*). Prior to 2005, Aruba had two records of Chestnut-sided Warbler, three of Cape May Warbler, three of Black-throated Blue Warbler, twelve of Prothonotary Warbler, six of Ovenbird, two of Louisiana Waterthrush, and six-plus records of Hooded Warbler (Voous 1983, Reuter and Prins, in prep.). Observations from Bonaire and Curaçao show these vagrants occur at least equally often on these islands (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). Furthermore, Voous (1983) listed only ten ABC Island records of Northern Parula and one of Common Yellowthroat, although both have subsequently been found regularly in small numbers on Aruba (J. Wells *in litt*,

Mlodinow pers. obs.). We found nine parulas during March 2003 and six during March 2004. Although we did not find any Common Yellowthroats during March 2003, five were detected at Bubali during March 2004. Of the above species, Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, and Common Yellowthroat are considered vagrants in nearby Venezuela, and Cape May Warbler, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Hooded Warbler are listed as rare there (Hilty 2003). The status of these species is similar on Trinidad and Tobago (French 1991). Only Prothonotary Warbler is uncommon to fairly common in Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago (Hilty 2003, French 1991).

On our previous March trips to Aruba, we had been surprised by the relative abundance of what should be rare-to-accidental neotropical migrants based on these species' abundance in the Lesser Antilles, Trinidad and Tobago, and Venezuela. This year furnished even more of these "rare" visitors than normal. It is not clear why Aruba (and Bonaire and Curaçao) seemingly attract so many more of these neotropical vagrants than other islands in the southern Caribbean or Venezuela. The relative lack of habitat may simply make it easier for observers to find them, especially when compared to mainland South America. Furthermore, the ABC Islands are located farther west than other southern Caribbean Islands, perhaps increasing the likelihood that species wintering predominantly in Central America and Mexico may stray there. Of the passerine vagrants noted above, Philadelphia Vireo, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Hooded Warbler, and Indigo Bunting have a predominantly Mexican / Central American winter distribution. Aruba is approximately 850 km west of Grenada, the nearest island in the Lesser Antilles, and 850 km east of Costa Rica, which is at the same latitude in Central America.

Furthermore, this year's success in particular may well have been related to the increased precipitation received from September 2004 through January 2005. During September, mostly related to the passage of Hurricane Ivan to the north, Aruba received 256 mm of rain compared with the long-term average of 35 mm, causing local flooding, a most unusual event on Aruba (Meteorological Service Netherlands Antilles and Aruba 2004). A high level of rainfall persisted through December, with the October through December precipitation total being 402 mm, well above the average of 200 mm (Meteorological Service Netherlands Antilles and Aruba 2004). Only in January did the heavy rainfall

begin to abate with 94 mm rather than the typical 62 mm and by February, precipitation levels had returned to normal (Meteorological Service Netherlands Antilles and Aruba 2005). The island was clearly greener during March 2005 than during the previous two years, and the number of dragonflies and butterflies were well above what we'd experienced before. With increased precipitation, and apparently increased insect abundance, it would be easy to imagine that more fall migrants chose to winter on Aruba rather than move on to the South American mainland. Indeed, the increased storm activity during the fall migratory period may even have led to more birds being deposited on Aruba.

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