

## LINCOLN'S SPARROW (*MELOSPIZA LINCOLNII*): NEW RECORD FOR THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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**Abstract:** On 8 and 9 November 2010, during ornithological field research in montane forests of Sierra de Bahoruco National Park, Dominican Republic at 1800 m elevation, we observed and photographed a Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolnii*). This report constitutes the first record of the species in this country; 10 previous records for Hispaniola were known only from Haiti in the early 1980s.

**Key words:** Dominican Republic, Hispaniola, Lincoln's Sparrow, *Melospiza lincolnii*, new avian record

**Resumen:** GORRIÓN DE LINCOLN (*MELOSPIZA LINCOLNII*): PRIMER REGISTRO PARA LA REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA. El 8 y 9 de noviembre de 2010, durante el trabajo de campo ornitológico en bosques montanos de la Parque Nacional Sierra de Bahoruco, República Dominicana, a una elevación de 1800 m, observamos y fotografiamos al Gorrión de Lincoln (*Melospiza lincolnii*). Este reporte constituye el primer registro de la especie en este país, ya que anteriormente sólo se conocían 10 registros de Haití en los inicios de los años 1980s.

**Palabras clave:** Hispaniola, Gorrión de Lincoln, *Melospiza lincolnii*, nuevo récord de aves, República Dominicana

**Résumé :** GORRIÓN BRUANT DE LINCOLN (*MELOSPIZA LINCOLNII*) : PREMIÈRE MENTION EN RÉPUBLIQUE DOMINICAINE. Les 8 et 9 novembre 2010, lors de travaux de recherche ornithologique de terrain dans les forêts de montagne du Parc national de la Sierra de Bahoruco, en République dominicaine, à 1800 m d'altitude, nous avons observé un Bruant de Lincoln (*Melospiza lincolnii*). Il s'agit de la première mention de l'espèce dans ce pays, les 10 données précédentes à Hispaniola provenaient d'observations réalisées en Haïti au début des années 80.

**Mots clés :** Bruant de Lincoln, Hispaniola, *Melospiza lincolnii*, nouvelle donnée de présence d'une espèce d'oiseau, République dominicaine

During ongoing field research on migrant and resident birds in Sierra de Bahoruco National Park, Dominican Republic, a team of ornithologists from Canada, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and the United States visited an established study site at Palo de Agua (18°12'25.2" N, 71°30'36.9" W) from 8–11 November 2010. On 8 and 9 November, we repeatedly observed a Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolnii*) at close range, and we obtained several diagnostic photographs (Figs. 1–3). During both days, the bird foraged in a small grassy opening along a remote, unpaved road, allowing approaches within 3 m. It appeared unconcerned about our presence, flushing short distances into the dense roadside understory vegetation only during extremely close approaches. Because the bird frequented a small area within 10 m of our field banding station, we had to pass it frequently during hourly net checks. It typically resumed foraging in the opening

within a minute of being flushed. It was not observed on our final two days of field work at Palo de Agua on 10 and 11 November.

To our knowledge, this represents the first documented record of Lincoln's Sparrow in the Dominican Republic, although the eleventh for Hispaniola. Ten previous records of the species were obtained from montane forests in neighboring Haiti during the early 1980s by Charles Woods and associates. Four individuals were observed or mist-netted at 2100 m elevation on the upper plateau of Morne La Visite between 15–18 December 1982 (Woods and Ottenwalder 1986; C. Woods unpubl. data). All birds were found in cutover scrubby broadleaf patches within forest dominated by Hispaniolan pine (*Pinus occidentalis*). Between 29 January and 6 February 1984, Woods's field team observed six Lincoln's Sparrows along the upper slopes of Pic Formon in Macaya National Park (now Macaya



Fig. 1. Lateral view of *Melospiza lincolnii* foraging on the ground at Palo de Agua, Dominican Republic, on 8 November 2010. Photo by Hubert Askanas.



Fig. 2. Frontal view of *Melospiza lincolnii* foraging on the ground on 8 November 2010. Photo by Hubert Askanas.

Biosphere Reserve) at elevations from 1700–2100 m (Woods and Ottenwalder 1986; C. Woods unpubl. data). All of these individuals, as well the Palo de Agua bird we found, inhabited the dense under-story of wet broadleaf forests, including disturbed forest edges with climbing bamboo, vines, and bracken fern thickets.

Although Lincoln's Sparrow is considered a winter vagrant on Hispaniola (Keith *et al.* 2003, Latta *et al.* 2006), observations by Woods *et al.* in the 1980s suggest that the species may occur more regularly on the island than has been documented. Its generally secretive, skulking behavior and apparent preference for dense habitats in remote locations may cause many individuals to escape detection (Woods and Ottenwalder 1986, Ammon 1995). However, if Lincoln's Sparrow preferentially selects montane forests and is more common than records indicate, we are surprised that our extensive mist-netting

throughout mountainous regions of Hispaniola since the mid-1990s has failed to detect the species. Prior to our observation of a single individual at Palo de Agua, no records of Lincoln's Sparrow have been obtained on Hispaniola since 1984. Woods *et al.*'s field work in the Macaya region during the winters of 1983–1985 included “similar intense surveys and transects ... at lower elevations on the Plaine Formon ... and on the top of Pic Macaya in the intact towering pine forest” (Woods pers. comm.). No Lincoln's Sparrows were detected in these areas, or on Pic Formon itself outside of 1984.

Woods *et al.*'s multiple records of Lincoln's Sparrow in montane forests of Haiti during the early 1980s, and its scarcity there and elsewhere on Hispaniola before or since, are difficult to interpret. While the species has experienced a small overall population decrease across its North American breeding range since 1980 (-0.9% annual rate of decline; Sauer *et al.* 2008), this is unlikely to account for the change. Lincoln's Sparrow is not known to be irruptive in winter (e.g., Ammon 1995), and we can offer no logical explanation for its apparent change in abundance in Haiti's montane forests between the early 1980s and mid-2000s onward. While the extent of forest cover has been steadily reduced in both Macaya and La Visite since Woods *et al.*'s surveys of both areas (Rimmer *et al.* 2005, 2010), this alone is unlikely to have caused the species's disappearance.

The Greater Antilles lie outside the main winter range of Lincoln's Sparrow, which is primarily distributed from the southern USA south to El Salvador and Honduras. In the West Indies, the species is considered rare or casual in winter on the Bahamas,



Fig. 3. Dorsal view of *Melospiza lincolnii* foraging on the ground on 9 November 2010. Photograph by Iván Mota.

Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico (Bond 1980, Ammon 1995). Based on the paucity of records over nearly 30 yr of regular observations and intensive mist-netting in montane forests of Hispaniola, we believe that Woods *et al.*'s mid-1980s records were anomalous and that Lincoln's Sparrow is appropriately classified as casual or vagrant on the island.

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