

AVIAN RESEARCH, MONITORING, AND CONSERVATION IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

KATE WALLACE

Sociedad Ornitológica de la Hispaniola, Apdo. 3284, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

Abstract.—I report on some of the recent and current research efforts in the Dominican Republic, including those of Joseph Wunderle on coffee plantations, Steven Latta on migratory birds, and Christopher Rimmer on Bicknell's Thrush (*Catharus bicknelli*). These workers, their Dominican assistants, and members of the Sociedad Ornitológica Hispaniola have developed a bird monitoring project in several areas and another to find nests of resident birds. Also, there is participation in a Peregrine Fund project to study the status of Ridgway's Hawk (*Buteo ridgwayi*). Information from these studies is expected to influence decisions that affect conservation.

Key words: *Buteo ridgwayi*, *Catharus bicknelli*, *Dominican Republic*, *Sierra de Bahoruco*, *Sociedad Ornitológica de la Hispaniola*

Resumen.—INVESTIGACIONES, MONITOREO Y CONSERVACIÓN DE LAS AVES EN LA REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA. Se describen estudios científicos recientes y en curso en la República Dominicana, incluyendo los de Joseph Wunderle sobre cafetales, los de Steven Latta sobre aves migratorias, y los de Chris Rimmer sobre el Zorzal de Bicknell (*Catharus bicknelli*). Ellos y sus asistentes dominicanos y los miembros de la Sociedad Ornitológica Hispaniola han desarrollado un proyecto de monitoreo de aves en varios puntos y otro de búsqueda de nidos de aves residentes. También han participado en un proyecto del Peregrine Fund estudiando el estado del Gavilán o Busardo de Ridgway (*Buteo ridgwayi*). Se espera que esta información influya en las decisiones que impactan la conservación.

Palabras clave: *Buteo ridgwayi*, *Catharus bicknelli*, *República Dominicana*, *sierra de Bahoruco*, *Sociedad Ornitológica Hispaniola*

Résumé.—RECHERCHE, SUIVI ET CONSERVATION DE L'AVIFAUNE DE LA RÉPUBLIQUE DOMINICAINE. Je présente des efforts de recherche récents et en cours en République Dominicaine ainsi que les activités de conservation liées des chercheurs et des membres de la Société d'Ornithologie d'Hispaniola.

Mots-clés: *Buteo ridgwayi*, *Catharus bicknelli*, *République Dominicaine*, *Sierra de Bahoruco*, *Société d'Ornithologie d'Hispaniola*

THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC comprises the eastern two-thirds of Hispaniola, the second largest of the Greater Antilles. The diversity of habitat is extreme, ranging from the highest mountain in the Caribbean, Pico Duarte, at 3175 m (10,400 ft) to Lago Enriquillo, a salt lake at 44 m (143 ft) below sea level. There are extensive dry thorn forests, cactus, a karst region, broad leaf and pine forests, and moist forest with tree ferns. Wetland habitats include several lakes, many rivers, and the coastal mix of mangrove, limestone cliffs, sandy and pebble beaches, and areas that have been developed for the production of salt.

Because of its position in the Caribbean, large size, and the variety of habitats, the Dominican Republic is home to 300 species of birds, of which 150 are resident, including several introduced species. Of special interest are the 27 endemics. The remaining species are migratory — shorebirds, ducks, raptors, and passerines, as well as the occasional vagrant.

RESEARCH

The Dominican Republic was the area for some of the first studies of avian use of shade coffee plantations. The work of Joseph M. Wunderle, Jr. and his colleague Steven Latta in the central mountain range provided some of the early scientific basis needed to promote "bird friendly coffee." I am happy to report that locally produced organic coffee is being promoted in the super markets of Santo Domingo, the nation's capitol.

Because no institutional ornithological community exists in the Dominican Republic, the projects of researchers, primarily from the United States, provide an extremely important opportunity to train Dominican field assistants. In all the projects mentioned below, these local people then become the mainstays of the program, and each project contains such training for new assistants, as an important component.

Steven Latta completed his thesis work in the Si-

erra de Bahoruco in southwestern Dominican Republic. His work established important factors in the winter limitation of migratory birds.

Another project which has been centered in the Bahoruco is the work of Christopher Rimmer of the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. Since 1994, Rimmer has been directing field studies to assess the distribution, habitat use, and conservation status of Bicknell's Thrush (*Catharus bicknelli*) in the Dominican Republic. This bird exemplifies the special threats facing a species with a limited habitat, both in its breeding and its wintering range, and which place it high on the endangered species list.

Other current activities include the continued work of James Wiley, visiting sites first studied 30 years ago for various species and also Alexander Cruz who is working with Village Weavers (*Ploceus cucullatus*) and Shiny cowbirds (*Molothrus bonariensis*).

The Peregrine Fund has begun work to determine the status of Ridgway's Hawk (*Buteo ridgwayi*). Following Wiley's earlier reports, and with extensive bush-whacking in Los Haitises, the team discovered eight nesting pairs in 2002. This work will be continuing, with Eladio Fernandez providing follow-up and photographic records.

The Cornell Laboratory of Biodiversity, which opened last summer in the eastern Dominican Republic, will also be proving research opportunities. The main focus of professors and students there is chemical analysis of plants used by birds, as well as by humans. David Rosane is focusing on the chemistry of the uropygial gland secretions of birds and the effect on avian parasites and fungi.

MONITORING

Latta and Rimmer have been instrumental in establishing in the Dominican Republic one of the only long-term constant-effort mist-netting projects in the Caribbean to monitor migrants and resident species. Using a phased approach, 12 long-term sites have been established in three areas of the country. Paid field workers and volunteers will assist at each site. Data will be deposited at Fundación Moscoso Puello, with VINS providing oversight and guidance of data management. Once again, it is important to mention that the training of local field assistants makes it possible to place the main responsibility for this project in the hands of Dominicans.

In addition, the Latta-Rimmer team has launched

a study of demographics and breeding biology of resident birds, a group that is seriously understudied. The three-year study involves eight sites in the Sierra de Bahoruco, in which nests of all breeding species will be closely monitored to determine local reproductive success and estimate survival rates.

Ducks Unlimited is sponsoring a waterfowl survey in the Dominican Republic, where population information is sadly out of date. It is too early to report long-term trends, although it is already possible to make comparisons of waterfowl populations between a wet and dry year.

The shorebird site at Salinas near Baní has been one of our favorite day trips. As a result we have expanded the list of birds known to occur there. A member of the staff in the Coastal Resources Office of the Department of Natural Resources is preparing a guide that will incorporate our information.

I attended the seabird workshop in Puerto Rico, organized by the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds, and hope to be able to obtain support for surveys in future breeding seasons at the main colonies in the northern and southwestern corners of the country.

CONSERVATION

In a world-wide assessment of bird protection priorities, Hispaniola ranks high in biological importance and its contribution to global biodiversity. Recent estimates, however, place forest loss at greater than 90% in the last 20 years. Heavy pressure from logging, charcoal production, grazing, and subsistence farming continues. Conservation is not a well-accepted concept in the country, because of the demands of poverty and a serious lack of education.

Our group has worked in communities associated with national parks in an effort to expand awareness of the importance of birds. In April 1998, we organized a ground-breaking national workshop on avian conservation in an effort to gather together the various groups with interest or responsibility in this area. The meeting was well attended and important contacts were made. Follow up, however, has not been noticeable, in part because of the changing cast of characters in government agencies.

We also hosted the annual meeting for the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds in 1999. This was another opportunity to demonstrate to groups here that the Dominican Republic

has a special place in the world of ornithology.

PUBLICATIONS

Publications are seriously lacking in the Dominican Republic. The excellent books of Annabelle Dod are out of print.

At the moment, however, several publications are in the works. We produced a book of photographs of 60 common birds. This is designed as an introduction for Dominicans and visitors.

The Latta-Rimmer team is working on a complete field guide. With the encouragement of Herbert Raffaele and his co-authors, and the use of the illustrations and whatever information is appropriate from their guide, the book will include all the birds

of the island. New illustrations of all the endemics are being prepared by Canadian artist Barry MacKay. There will be English and Spanish editions.

Another book, which will be a wonderful resource, is an annotated check-list, prepared by Allan Keith and colleagues.

We have recently incorporated as the Sociedad Ornitológica de la Hispaniola and have signed an agreement with the Fundación Moscoso Puello. This organization will provide guidance and also serve as the location of our database.

We hope this will enable us to take a more active role in conservation.