

Status of Caribbean Forest Endemics Special Issue: Editors' Foreword

The high degree of avian endemism in the Caribbean is arguably one of the most defining qualities of the region, and an irreplaceable part of its natural heritage. However, these Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face tremendous challenges retaining these irreplaceable elements of biodiversity such as habitat loss, over-exploitation, alien invasive species, and climate change. This is especially the case for Caribbean forest-dependent endemic birds, which due to their habitat requirements, are a group often most threatened by human activity. Thus, in its most recent assessment of globally threatened species, the IUCN's Red List categorizes 64 species of forest birds from the insular Caribbean as Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable, or Near Threatened, representing approximately 40% of the forest endemics in the region (BirdLife International 2017).

These Caribbean forest endemic birds are among the most well known and iconic of the islands' avifauna. They often serve as symbols of national pride (e.g., Grenada Dove [*Leptotila wellsi*], Jamaican Red-billed Streamertail [*Trochilus polytmus polytmus*], and Dominican Imperial Parrot [*Amazona imperialis*]), and provide important ecological functions in these insular ecosystems, such as seed dispersal, pollination, and predation. These unique species also make the Caribbean an important birding destination, providing sustainable livelihoods for many people in the region.

Despite the distinctiveness of these forest birds, their degree of vulnerability to anthropogenic threats, and their value to local communities, contemporary published literature on their status and ecology is surprisingly limited. The lack of such data on which to base recovery and management of these forest birds remains a significant challenge to conservation efforts.

At its 2015 meeting in Jamaica, BirdsCaribbean held a special session on the status of Caribbean forest endemics in an effort to galvanize interest in these species and provide a forum for the work of those researching and managing the region's endemic birds. This meeting highlighted that although some progress

was being made on several taxa, much remained to be done, and that there remained significant gaps in our current understanding of the status and conservation of many of these forest endemic birds.

Arising from this meeting, the editors of the *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* and the Board of BirdsCaribbean invited those authors at the meeting and other biologists working in the region on forest endemics to publish their work in the current issue. The 10 papers in this Special Issue provide a range of data on the status of forest endemics in the region, including demographic studies on nine endemic species such as a multi-year study of the population trends of the Grenada Dove and a review of research on the White-breasted Thrasher (*Ramphocinclus brachyurus*), to broader conservation themes such as landscape-level impacts of disturbance on avian communities in Jamaica, and the contribution of this journal to the publication of research on the region's forest endemics.

As many papers in this Special Issue highlight, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the biology of these species. We have been reminded of the value of these data by the intense activity of the 2017 hurricane season, which has already had tremendous impacts on islands with forest-dependent endemics such as Puerto Rico, Dominica, and Barbuda, to name a few. It is our hope that this Special Issue will not only provide vital data for managers of the specific taxa covered in the issue, but that it might encourage other workers in the region to continue to redouble their efforts to collect data on the status of these species, and publish their very important work on this iconic group of Caribbean birds.

Literature Cited

BirdLife International. 2017. BirdLife Data Zone. www.birdlife.org/datazone.

—Howard P. Nelson, Jason M. Townsend,
Douglas E. Weidemann, and C. Justin Proctor