

RECENT COLONIZATION OF ST. MARTIN BY THE SCALY-BREADED THRASHER (*MARGAROPS FUSCUS*)

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Abstract.—We report the colonization of St. Martin by the Scaly-breasted Thrasher (*Margarops fuscus*). During 2002, biologists banded seven birds of this species and observed 25 other individuals during area searches. This indicates a northward range expansion for this species.

Key words: colonization, Lesser Antilles, *Margarops fuscus*, *Scaly-breasted Thrasher*, *St. Martin*

Resumen.—COLONIZACIÓN RECIENTE DE SAN MARTÍN POR EL ZORZAL PECHIESCAMADO (*MARGAROPS FUSCUS*). Reportamos la colonización de *Margarops fuscus* en St. Martin. Durante 2002, biólogos atraparon siete individuos y observaron 25 otros durante buscas del area. Esto indica una expansion hacia el norte por esta especie.

Palabras clave: Antiles Menores, colonización, *Margarops fuscus*, *San Martín*, *Zorzal Pechiescamado*

INTRODUCTION

THE SCALY-BREADED THRASHER (*Margarops fuscus*) is endemic to the Lesser Antilles and known to range from St. Barthelemy in the northern extreme of its range to St. Vincent in the southern end. Recent literature suggests that this species is declining throughout its range and has been extirpated from St. Eustatius, Barbuda, and Barbados (Voous 1983, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). Additional literature states the presence of the Scaly-breasted Thrasher as an accidental visitor to St. Martin (McLaughlin and Roughgarden 1989, Benito-Espinal 1990, Evans 1990). During bird surveys on St. Martin from 2 January through 7 March 2002, biologists trapped seven Scaly-breasted Thrashers in mist-nets and observed 25 additional individuals within our 20-ha study area during standardized area searches.

METHODS

During the winter of 2002, banding of overwintering and resident songbirds was conducted at a research station at Lotterie Farm, within a secondary dry forest, a rare habitat on the island. Ten nets were placed at the study site and arranged at a distance of three nets per 2-ha area. This distance assured that biologists could maintain all nets within a 15-min time span. All nets were 12-m-long, 30-mm-mesh, 4-tier, tethered, nylon mist-nets. Nets were open during the hours of the most bird activity, be-

ginning at sunrise and continuing for 6 hours. Nets were placed in areas of high avian traffic, including shrub areas and within canopy areas of larger trees. This assured a high capture rate. Finally, all birds were banded with uniquely numbered bands. The station was run for four consecutive days. Two four-day banding periods were run over a two-month time span; the first starting 11 February and ending 14 February and the second starting 4 March and ending 7 March 2002. Additionally, once during each four-day banding period, biologists traveled over the trails between mist-nets and recorded all the bird species either seen or heard.

RESULTS

On 11 February 2001, our first day banding, a Scaly-breasted Thrasher was trapped in a mist-net, drawing our attention to the presence of this species on the island. During the subsequent seven days of netting, we trapped and banded six more individuals. Of the seven birds banded, four were adults and three were in their first year. Of the four adults, two were determined to be males based on the presence of an enlarged cloaca, and two were determined to be female based on the presence of brood patches. The three first-year birds were identified by the presence of incompletely pneumaticized skulls. Additionally, we detected a high count of 25 individuals during area searches of our 20-ha study area.

DISCUSSION

The Scaly-breasted Thrasher has a limited range, constituting only a small portion of the Lesser Antilles. Little is known regarding the life history of this species. As has been previously mentioned, this species population has been reduced on many islands within its range and is possibly extirpated from three of these islands. The cause for this decline is not well documented. Our observations of this species within secondary dry forest on St. Martin supports the recent literature, which suggests that this species prefers forest habitat (Voous 1983, Bond 1985, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). Secondary dry forests have been reduced on many islands as a result of over-harvesting timber for cooking and building materials as well as clearing for economic development. This reduction of primary habitat for the Scaly-breasted Thrasher indicates that habitat fragmentation might be a main cause for the reduced population (pers. observ.).

Scaly-breasted Thrasher colonization is undocumented in the literature, although the closely related Pearly-eyed Thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*) has been known to colonize from island to island (Norton 2000). It is an "accidental visitor" to St. Martin so it is documented to move between islands, but not to colonize. Birds of this species might have dispersed to St. Martin in direct response to habitat restrictions within their current range. Environmental events such as hurricanes possibly have displaced this species from nearby islands.

The presence of adult females with heavy brood patches and adult males with enlarged cloacal protuberances indicates a possible breeding population on St. Martin. Additionally, the presence of three first-year birds supports this assumption.

Future research should focus on estimating the population and status of the Scaly-breasted Thrasher on St. Martin. Additionally, habitat preferences, foraging requirements, and breeding cycles need to be identified.

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