

FIRST SIGHT RECORDS OF SWAINSON'S HAWK (*BUTEO SWAINSONI*) FOR TRINIDAD AND CHACACHACARE ISLAND, WITH COMMENTS ON ITS STATUS AND TRANS-CARIBBEAN MIGRATION

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Abstract.—I report sight records of a light-morph adult Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) at Grande Riviere and Matelot, Trinidad, on 16 and 17 May 1998, and a light-morph immature at Chacachacare Island, northwest of Trinidad, from 29 October 1999 to 13 January 2000. A review of records from the region is provided as evidence for migration across the Caribbean Sea.

Resumen.—PRIMEROS REGISTROS VISUALES DEL GAVILÁN DE SWAINSON (*BUTEO SWAINSONI*) PARA TRINIDAD Y LA ISLA DE CHACACHACARE, CON COMENTARIOS SOBRE SU ESTADO Y MIGRACIÓN TRANS-CARIBEÑA. Se resume un registro visual de un Gavilán de Swainson (*Buteo swainsoni*) adulto de la fase pálida en Grande Riviere y Matelot, Trinidad, el 16 y 17 de mayo de 1998, y un inmaduro de la fase pálida en la isla de Chacachacare, noroeste de Trinidad, del 29 de octubre de 1999 hasta el 13 de enero de 2000. Se resumen los registros de la región como evidencia para la migración sobre el mar Caribe.

Key words: *Buteo swainsoni*, *Caribbean*, *Chacachacare Island*, *distribution*, *migration*, *Swainson's Hawk*, *Trinidad*

THE SWAINSON'S HAWK (*Buteo swainsoni*) breeds in western North America and winters chiefly in southern South America, though a small percentage of individuals migrate through eastern North America and winter in southern Florida (e.g., England *et al.* 1997, American Ornithologists' Union 1998). Given the long distances routinely flown by this species, vagrancy probably occurs more frequently than reported, especially in the Caribbean region and in northern South America where few experienced observers are present. In this note I report the first sight records of this species from Trinidad and nearby Chacachacare Island, review further records from Tobago, and review West Indian records as evidence for trans-Caribbean migration.

OBSERVATIONS

In the afternoon of 16 May 1998, I observed a large, distant hawk soaring over forest just south of Grande Riviere, along the northern coast of Trinidad. Other than distinctive gaps in the primaries of both wings and a notably pale upper surface of the tail, I could not make out any further details. On three occasions, however, the hawk gave a distinct, drawn-out, descending whistle. Earlier in the day the same bird, recognized by the distinctive gaps in its primaries, was briefly observed by C. Ramjohn and F. Lucas as it soared over forest west of Matelot.

The following day, 17 May 1998, I was hiking at Matelot with Ramjohn and Lucas when at 11:33 hr we observed the same bird, again recognized by the distinctive gaps in its primaries, for about 1.5 min as

it circled about 30 m above us. I immediately recognized it as a light-morph adult Swainson's Hawk by the dark breast contrasting with the pale underparts, except for a few dark streaks extending from the dark breast into the belly. Fine bars were visible on the wings. The tail was finely barred with a broader terminal dark band. The basal two-thirds of the tail were white on the upper surface, contrasting with the dark upperparts. We did not notice a white throat or a strong contrast in the underwing linings, though these may have been obscured by strong back-lighting. The hawk was briefly chased by a Plumbeous Kite (*Ictinia plumbea*) before it disappeared. I did not notice or look for a dihedral wing profile.

While surveying birds on Chacachacare Island, one of the Bocas Islands off northwestern Trinidad, several students and I repeatedly observed a light-morph immature Swainson's Hawk soaring over the island's southern peninsula for about 1.25 hr during 29–31 October and for about 1.25 hr on 14 November 1999. The upperparts could not be observed well, but appeared uniformly dark. The bird had a pale head with a dark blotch behind the eye. The broad wings were relatively pointed for a *Buteo*; from below, the pale, slightly cream-colored underwing linings contrasted strongly with the darker, finely barred flight feathers. The underparts were white, with no noticeable spotting or streaking; the throat appeared slightly darker. The legs were orangeish. The fairly broad tail had 6–7 narrow bars, with a wider subterminal dark band. I did not notice or look for a dihedral wing profile. The hawk repeatedly ut-

tered a long, descending whistle, 2–3 sec in length, while flying and while perched on a distant tree; each day it responded initially to whistled imitations, soaring directly overhead within 25 m and peering downward at us. On one occasion it hovered for 1–2 min. Once it chased an immature Gray Hawk (*Asturina nitida*) similar in size; another time it flew beside a much smaller Short-tailed Hawk (*B. brachyurus*).

During 12–13 January 2000, the hawk was heard repeatedly, but not seen, by J. Teixeira and G. Lalsingh, who had observed and heard the bird repeatedly while with me in October and November 1999. I could not relocate the hawk during a 50 min search on 23 January 2000.

DISCUSSION

The field marks observed on the Trinidad bird are diagnostic for a typical adult Swainson's Hawk (e.g., Clark and Wheeler 1987). The head and underparts of the Chacachacare bird were unusually pale for a Swainson's Hawk, but light-morph immature birds occasionally exhibit such feathers (W. Clark, C. Lott, M. Orsag, and Z. Smith; pers. comm.), possibly because of feather lice damaging the darker tips of the feathers (C. Lott, pers. comm.). Although these sight records represent the first for Trinidad and the Bocas Islands, there are several previous reports from the adjacent island of Tobago. Andres *et al.* (1991) described a sight record of a light-morph adult from Little Tobago, off the northeastern tip of Tobago, on 22 March 1990, and reported an earlier sighting at the same locality by D. Finch on 27 January 1989. Another light-morph adult was seen at Little Tobago on 31 December 1996 (Petersen and McRae, in press). What may have been the same light-morph adult was seen at Flagstaff Hill, northeastern Tobago, by R. French on 17 March 1998 and at Little Tobago by G. Engblom on the remarkably late date of 21 June 1998 (unpublished records accepted by Trinidad and Tobago Rare Bird Committee). W. Murphy (pers. Comm.) briefly viewed through a camcorder a light-phased adult videotaped at Flagstaff Hill by a birder on 10 April 1999; unfortunately the birder's name and whereabouts of the video footage are unknown. An immature bird was seen by R. Neckles (pers. comm.) near Flagstaff Hill on 28 January 2001.

The fall and early winter record from Chacachacare and winter records from northeastern Tobago may represent individuals straying eastward across northern South America, rather than migrating southward as usual, after migrating through Central America.

Alternatively, they may represent trans-Caribbean migrants arriving in the fall and wintering in the islands.

In the Florida Keys, most Swainson's Hawks are immatures, whose numbers peak in late October and November; although some winter, most apparently retreat northward to winter on the mainland of southern Florida (Hoffman and Darrow 1992). Conceivably, a few individuals may migrate southward across the Caribbean. If correctly identified, a sight record from Jamaica on 15 October 1974 (Bond 1976) provides the only direct evidence of southbound migration across the Caribbean.

The spring records in northeastern Trinidad and northeastern Tobago may represent northbound migrants from southern South America that traversed northeastward rather than northwestward across South America, or simply birds that had wintered in the islands. The persistent appearance of birds on the northeastern side of both Trinidad and Tobago during spring suggests that they lingered before attempting a trans-Caribbean flight, though at least one bird appears to have spent the summer. Bradshaw *et al.* (1997) described a light-morph adult seen in the Dominican Republic on 22 April 1996, providing the only direct evidence of northbound migration across the Caribbean.

The fairly regular appearance of Swainson's Hawk in frequently birded Trinidad and Tobago since 1989 suggests that it may have been unnoticed previously. The few West Indian records suggest that it may also be overlooked as a potential fall and spring transient. Birders and ornithologists should be alert for this species throughout the region.

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