BIRD OBSERVATIONS IN THREATENED FOREST FRAGMENTS OF SIERRA DE NEIBA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

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AS PART OF A BROAD-SCALE EFFORT to document the distributional status of Bicknell's Thrush (*Catharus bicknelli*) and other montane forests birds in the Dominican Republic, the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) conducted field surveys in two areas of Sierra de Neiba during February and November of 1997. This brief report summarizes VINS' findings and provides an overview of the conservation status of the two areas visited.

A team of VINS and Dominican field biologists first surveyed Sierra de Neiba in February 1997. The westernmost section of montane forest above "Vuelta de Quince" on the road to Hondo Valle was surveyed from 16–18 February. Although the roughly 25-square km patch of moist broadleaf forest that remains here appears to be largely intact, the slopes between Los Pinos and Vuelta de Quince have been severely deforested and converted to agriculture and grazing. Remnant solitary hardwood trees and isolated small forested patches suggest that an extensive, mature montane forest once covered these slopes. The remnant tract at Vuelta de Quince clearly represents a small fraction of the original forest. Pressure on this remaining patch of intact forest appears to be high, given its proximity to the Haitian border and the increasing spread of clearing from below. Moderate levels of disturbance were noted within the forest, including limited extraction of large pine and cedar trees, and scattered clearings for crop production or livestock pastures. Many small trails had been cut for wood extraction, pig snaring, and possibly other uses.

Field surveys of the Vuelta de Quince area during these three days revealed the typical assemblage of Hispaniolan montane broadleaf forest birds. These included at least eight Bicknell's Thrushes (the first documentation known to us of this species in the area) and several rare, endemic species, including Chat Tanagers (*Calyptophilus frugivorus neibae*), two La Selle's Thrushes (*Turdus swalesi*), and White-winged Warblers (*Xenoligea montana*).

A team of 4 VINS researchers and 1 Dominican biologist revisited this area on 14–15 November 1997. We encountered 12 Bicknell's Thrushes, of which 4 were captured and banded. We also compiled careful records of all avian species seen or heard during this brief visit (Table 1), including first the documented record of Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) in the Caribbean Basin (Rimmer and McFarland 1998). Although we did not specifically document new incursions into the forest habitat or further evidence of extraction, Ernst Rupp of DVS/DED, who works extensively in the area in conjunction with the Departamento de Vida Silvestre, reported that new agricultural plots had been cleared atop the sierra, and that community-based educational efforts were being made to reduce anticipated future clearing. Based on our limited field work in this area and our collective knowledge of the rare and threatened status of montane broadleaf forest birds on Hispaniola, we believe that this remnant forest fragment constitutes a critical, irreplaceable habitat in need of concerted conservation efforts. We further believe that current rates of deforestation and land conversion in the area may reduce this fragment to a size or configuration that will no longer sustain viable populations of some avian species within 5–10 years.

We also visited the eastern section of Sierra de Neiba, centered in the Monte Bonito area above Apolinario, on 18–20 February 1997. This area had been severely impacted by extensive agricultural clearing and timber extraction, leaving only narrow fringes of forest. Areas below 1600 m were virtually treeless, and cutting in the park above this elevation continued unabated during our visit. In 1995, cleared areas and agricultural plots within this section of the park were estimated to occupy 30–40% of the land (A. Schubert, pers. comm.). In early 1997, we estimated this figure to be 70–80%, with little forest remaining within park boundaries and none outside. We did encounter seven Bicknell's Thrushes in the few intact forest fragments that we surveyed. We believe that complete loss of this eastern section of forest fragments that we surveyed. We believe that complete loss of this eastern section of forest may occur within 2–3 years, although increasing fragmentation could render many forest patches insufficient to support most forest-dwelling birds even earlier. We obtained further evidence of forest loss in this general area during March of 1997, when numerous large fires were visible at night from our high elevation study sites in Sierra de Baoruco.

In summary, despite its 1995 designation as a national park, our limited field experience in Sierra de Neiba indicates that the area is losing forest cover from both harvesting and burning at an exceedingly rapid rate. The Neibas may represent a very important center of endemism, and thus biodiversity, on Hispaniola. We believe that the time frame for effective conservation of montane forest habitats in Sierra de Neiba is extremely short.

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TABLE 1. List of bird species observed above Vuelta de Quince, Sierra de Neiba, Dominican Republic, 14–15 November 1997.

Scientific name	English name	Spanish name	Number observed
Aratinga chloroptera	Hispaniolan Parakeet	Perico	6
Amazona ventralis	Hispaniolan Parrot	Cotorra	18
Streptoprocne zonaris	White-collared Swift	Vencejo de Collar	10
Chlorostilbon swainsonii	Hispaniolan Emerald	Zumbador Mediano	5
Temnotrogon roseigaster	Hispaniolan Trogon	Papagayo	2
Todus angustirostris	Narrow-billed Tody	Chi-cui	8
Melanerpes striatus	Hispaniolan Woodpecker	Carpintero	10
Elaenia fallax	Greater Antillean Elaenia	Maroita Canosa	8
Contopus caribaeus	Greater Antillean Pewee	Maroita	2
Myiarchus stolidus	Stolid Flycatcher	Manuelito	2
Kalochelidon euchrysea	Golden Swallow	Golondrina Verde	12
Corvus palmarum	Palm Crow	Cao	6
Myadestes genibarbis	Rufous-throated Solitaire	Jiguero	12
Catharus bicknelli	Bicknell's Thrush	Zorzal Migratorio	12
Turdus swalesi	La Selle's Thrush	Zorzal de la Selle	6
Mimocichla plumbea	Red-legged Thrush	Chua-chua	1
Dendroica caerulescens	Black-throated Blue Warbler	Ciguita Azul	15
Geothlypis trichas	Common Yellowthroat	Ciguita Enmascarada	3
Microligea palustris	Green-tailed Warbler	Ciguita Colaverde	9
Xenoligea montana	White-winged Warbler	Ciguita Aliblanca	2
Coereba flaveola	Bananaquit	Ciguita Commun	6
Euphonia musica	Blue-hooded Euphonia	Jilguerillo	4
Spindalis zena	Stripe-headed Tanager	Cigua Amarilla	25
Calyptophilus frugivorus	Chat Tanager	Patico Chirri	3
Zonotrichia capensis	Rufous-collared Sparrow	Cigua de Constanza	5
Melospiza melodia	Song Sparrow	—	1
Carduelis dominicensis	Greater Antillean Siskin	Canario	5

LITERATURE CITED

RIMMER, C. C., AND K. P. MCFARLAND. 1998. Two new avian records for Hispaniola: Swainson's Warbler and Song Sparrow. El Pitirre 11(1):15–17.