

DOES THE ST. KITTS BULLFINCH STILL EXIST?

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ON A TRIP TO ST. KITTS, mid-January 1997, I was surprised with the news that there was an apparent sighting of the St. Kitts Bullfinch (*Loxigilla portoricensis grandis*) a few years ago. The report comes from one of St. Kitts' most eminent environmentalists and naturalists, Campbell Evelyn, who has been hunting and traversing the mountain-forests and wetlands for over 60 years. On my trips to St. Kitts, I make every effort to catch-up with Campbell on what has been happening in and around St. Kitts. Discussions often end up on some of the animals, plants, and places he recalls from his childhood.

It was during a discussion on some of the inaccessible forests of the steep high mountains of St. Kitts that the subject of the Mountain Blacksmith came up. Campbell was unfamiliar with the local name of the bird, but knew the name Mountain Blacksmith as it referred to a high-altitude member of the grasshopper family, which has a call reminiscent of a hammer striking an anvil. After clarifying what I meant, he told the story of seeing the Bullfinch about three years ago.

As told by Campbell, he was in the company of his wife Joyce, sitting on a rock in the forest in Stone-fort Ghaut, when his wife drew his attention to an unusual bird jumping about the branches, about 6 m above the ground in the understory. The bird was about 9-11 m away from where they were sitting. Their view was very clear, since sunlight was streaming through the undergrowth. They described the bird as almost entirely black with red on top of the head, and on the throat below the chin. When I dismissed the report as a mistaken identification, suspecting that what they actually saw was the close relative, the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla noctis*) they said that they are quite familiar with the bullfinch, as it is locally called and which is quite common in St. Kitts, and that the bird in question was much larger with a heavier bill. To the Evelyn's, the bird they saw was quite distinctive and distinct from the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch. Campbell then pointed to some lovebirds that the family keeps as pets and said that it was about that size (which would be about the right size for the St. Kitts Bullfinch).

I subsequently showed them pictures of the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch, which they dismissed, and on showing them a picture of the Puerto Rican Bullfinch they confirmed that this was similar to what they saw.

James Bond describes the Puerto Rico Bullfinch as being mostly black, with the crown, foreneck, upper chest and under tail-coverts rufous. The immature is brownish-olive, darker above than below, under tail-coverts rufous. The St. Kitts subspecies was larger than the Puerto Rican subspecies. At least by the 1980 edition of *Birds of the West Indies*, Bond believed that the St. Kitts subspecies had been exterminated.

Before the 1994 sighting by the Evelyn's, the last record of the St. Kitts Bullfinch was in the 1920s (Raffaele 1983). Mention is made of the bird in the unpublished notes of R. B. Todd, a Kittitian and great uncle of Campbell Evelyn. The notes were written in the early 1900s, although his sightings of the species may date from the late 1800s. In an interesting account he notes that the birds,

"Are now almost extinct, although not many years ago they were frequently seen high up in the mountains. The plumage of the male is black, the top of the head and under the throat red, the end of the body under the tail dull red. The female bird

is of a dark brown colour. In shape it resembles the English Bullfinch [perhaps referring to the Lesser Antillean Bullfinch], although somewhat larger than the latter bird. Their cry is a shrill loud whistle often repeated. The belief that this bird is the originator of the sound of a blacksmith hammer beat on an anvil, is erroneous, the sound being produced by the blacksmith insect of the grasshopper family. The monkeys which are very destructive to eggs and young birdlife are probably the chief cause of the rapid disappearance of these birds."

Monkeys, mongoose, and hurricanes lead a list of threats that have been facing birds in St. Kitts for the better part of a century, but it is one of the few Caribbean islands that is experiencing an increase in its rainforest cover. The abandonment of many former sugarcane producing areas is allowing forests to reclaim these territories. According to Evelyn, many areas in St. Kitts remain inaccessible and relatively unexplored. This is due not only to the steep wet terrain, but to the potential dangers associated in encountering illegal marijuana cultivations. It is conceivable that the St. Kitts Bullfinch hangs on in small numbers in some of these inaccessible high mountain forests. In fact, other species may be hidden there. The Lesser Antillean Peewee (*Contopus latirostris*) is not listed for St. Kitts by authorities such as Bond or Danforth; however, it appears in accounts by Todd (circa 1900), Morris and Lemon (1982), and as recently as 1993 it was recorded by an avid and knowledgeable birdwatcher (N. Gricks, pers. comm.).

I know of only one attempt to locate the St. Kitts Bullfinch in recent years. In the mid-1970s, Herbert Raffaele spent three days on the island, as much of that time as possible in the Mt. Misery (now Mt. Liamuga) area. Unfortunately, it rained for the three days and thus his observations were restricted (Raffaele, pers. comm.). *Loxigilla portoricensis grandis* remains an intriguing enigma. Anyone interested in trying to determine whether the species has been able to hold on precariously will find enthusiastic partners at the St. Christopher Heritage Society in Basseterre.

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