

A BIRDING TRIP TO HISPANIOLA AND PUERTO RICO

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Abstract. – During a birding trip to Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, 20 September to 4 October 1999, 25 of the 26 endemics of Hispaniola and all of the 16 endemic species of Puerto Rico were observed. In all we identified 134 species of birds on Hispaniola and 99 species in Puerto Rico.

Resumen. –

Key words: *Hispaniola, Puerto Rico*

From 20 September through 4 October 1999, three travelling companions, Karl-Erik Gustafsson Tvååker, Stefan Andersson Forsheda, and Tommy Thorén Varnamo, and I traveled extensively through southwestern Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico in an attempt to observe all endemic species of birds. We were equipped with binoculars, spotting scopes, and a **Mini Disc (MD)** player. Gustafsson had compiled recordings of all species we considered could be difficult to observe, as well as the birds we expected to hear a great deal more than see.

Our efforts in the Dominican Republic were centered around Barahona, including the Baoruco Mountains, the coast south of this range, and the vicinity of Lago Enriquillo. During our six days in the Dominican Republic, we traveled the road past Duvergé, Puerto Escondido, El Aguacate, and the site known as “The Bulldozer”. We birded at some places along the road to Pedernales and the secondary road from Pedernales, over the Baoruco Mountains, to El Aguacate. We also spent some time at sites along the western side of Lago de Enriquillo.

In Puerto Rico we visited El Yunque, Humacao Refuge, Guánica State Forest, Playa la Parguera, Maricao Camp area, Hacienda Juanita, Barceloneta, Río Grande, and Luquillo. The forested areas on both islands were visited at different hours of the day, i.e. before and during dawn, after daybreak and mid-day. The lake areas were visited during daylight, at dusk, and after dusk.

All observations of birds, as well as time of day and how to get to the sites of the rarer birds were carefully described. For a more detailed report see Lithner (1999), and for a full report on all birds observed, see Gustafsson (1999), where all species are listed in English and in Latin. Here, I present highlights of our searches, with a table of all species seen in both counties (Table 1). We were ably assisted by Sr. Julio Felíz in the Dominican Republic, and by Sr. Jafet Valdéz in Puerto Rico. I have included several of their comments here since they contributed to deepen our knowledge of the birds and understanding of their problems. Here I provide a narrative of our searches, listing endemics found and locations, as well as other interesting observations.

RESULTS

Hispaniola

21 September. – Road to Cabral, **9.7 km (6 mi)** east of Barahona: Broad-billed Tody (*Todus subulatus*), Greater Antillean Bullfinch (*Loxigilla violacea*), Stolid Flycatcher (*Myiarcus stolidus*), among other species observed.

“Bulldozer area” beyond the military checkpoint at El **Aguacate (7)**, Sierra de Baruco: Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanager (*Spindalis dominicensis*), Narrow-billed Tody (*Todus angustirostris*), Black-headed Palm-Tanager (*Phaenicophilus palmarum*), Hispaniolan Parrot (*Amazona ventralis*), Antillean Mango (*Anthracothonax dominicus*), Hispaniolan Emerald (*Chlorostilbon swainsonii*), and numerous Hispaniolan Trogon (*Priotelus roseigaster*). Some 200 m above the military checkpoint, we located a small flock of White-winged Crossbills (*Loxia leucoptera*), Antillean Siskins (*Carduelis dominicensis*), a flock of Hispaniolan Parakeets (*Aratinga chloroptera*), and a White-winged Warbler (*Xenoligea montana*). A Hispaniolan Lizard-Cuckoo (*Saurothea longirostris*) was recorded near El Aguacate.

We looked intensively for the Golden Swallow (*Tachycineta euchrysea*), and were disappointed when flocks of green-tinged swallows foraging over an isolated patch of pine trees near El Aguacate proved to be Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*). Altogether about 40 birds were observed.

Along the road **10.9 km (6.8 mi)** from El **Aguacate** to Puerto Escondido and **25.4 km (15.8 mi)** from the **three-way crossing at Puerto Escondido** a Bay-breasted Cuckoo (*Hyetornis rufigularis*) responded to vocalization playback, and one bird was observed.

22 September. – Between Duvergé and Puerto Escondido, 14 Burrowing Owls (*Athene cunicularia*) were observed. At **31.4 km (19.5 mi)** beyond the National Park office, **we found** an Ashy-faced Owl (*Tyto glaucops*)

calling. We spent about 20 min testing the owl's reaction to Ashy-faced Owl, as well as Barn Owl (*T. alba*) vocal recordings from our MD-player. Despite the calls from the two species sounding similar to the human ear, the owl did not show any particular interest in the playback call of the Barn Owl, but strongly responded to the call of the Ashy-faced Owl.

Above the military checkpoint at El Aguaqate, we flushed an Hispaniolan Nightjar (*Caprimulgus ekmani*) from the road at 06:10 h, and an unidentified goatsucker a moment later. Some 15 min later and about 300 m above the military checkpoint **on the unpaved road** in the pine forest, we found a Least Pauraque (*Siphonorhis brewsteri*) perched about 15 m from us, where we watched it for **at least ten maybe 15 seconds, possibly even longer before it flew**. Whereas the Hispaniolan Nightjar and unidentified goatsucker were large nightjars with rather typical goatsucker shape and flight, the Least Pauraque was much smaller and somewhat compressed (from front to tail). When the pauraque flew, its rather short rounded wings were surprising and its flight was unlike that of any goatsucker any of us has seen before. The description in Raffaele *et al.* (p. 326) of an "erratic and fluttering" flight is accurate. The pauraque's flight reminded us of a butterfly. The **paraque** was not expected at the altitude of El **Aguaqate**. Raffaele *et al.* (1998) state that the species is found "on the north slope of the Sierra de Baoruco, ...up to 450 m". Mr. Feliz, was not surprised by our observation. He told us that at least one of the groups that usually come here, look for Least Pauraque along this road.

At the Bulldozer Area, we lured two La Selle Thrushes (*Turdus swalesi*) at 06:30 h using playback vocalizations. Later in the morning, a La Selle Thrush was seen foraging along the sides of the unpaved road. At dawn we successfully lured an Eastern Chat-Tanager (*Calyptophilus frugivorus*), but the bird delivered only a single, "decent" phrase. During our return from El **Aguaqate**, we MD-lured an Antillean Piculet (*Nesocittes micromegas*), but failed to locate the Flat-billed Vireo (*Vireo nanus*) at a recommended site 1.6 km (1 mi) below Puerto Escondido.

Along Lago Enriquillo, toward Limón, we located the two species of crow at the eastern limits of La Zorza, in a huge stand of palms. The crows were best separated by voice: that of the Hispaniolan Palm Crow (*Corvus palmarum*) reminded us of a European Raven (*Corvus frugilegus*), whereas the call of the White-necked Crow (*Corvus leucognaphalus*) seemed to be a mixture of squabbling-like calls of an Oropendola and an European Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*).

We visited Laguna del Rincón, which offered wetland birds, and a few **unidentified Icterini (1)** At 18:55 and 19:05 h, two groups consisting of two and four West Indian Whistling-Ducks (*Dendrocygna arborea*) flew from the dense emergent vegetation of the laguna. Some coots were also present, but were too distant to be identified. Other species present were Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*), Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*), Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), and Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*).

23 September. Searches for Ridgway's Hawk (*Buteo ridgwayi*) along the coastal forested slope of the mountains 16 km (10 mi) south of Barahona were fruitless. While searching, however, we saw a loosely connected group of swallows, containing about 30 Caribbean Martins (*Progne dominicensis*), several Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*), and two Cliff Swallows (*Hirundo pyrrhonota*).

At **20.1 km** (12.5 mi) east of Pedernales, we headed for the coast at Cabo Rojo to look for White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*). At **9.7 km** (6 mi) we found several North American waders (Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*, Wilson's Plover *C. wilsonia*, Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*, Western Sandpiper *C. mauri*, Baird's Sandpiper *C. bairdii*, Pectoral Sandpiper *C. melanotos*, and Stilt Sandpiper *C. himantopus*) in some small depressions with about 10 cm of water, **on** a small airstrip. We then drove farther along the coastline to a primitive quay. No tropicbirds were present, but a few Brown Boobies (*Sula leucogaster*) and Royal Terns (*Sterna maxima*) were observed.

From the viaduct at the main road, we ascended (3) toward the Sierra de Baruco to search for Golden Swallows near some old Bauxite mines about 1200 m above sea level, but no swallows were found. Several White-winged Crossbills were encountered at various places at this altitude.

24 September. – Additional searches for Ridgway's Hawk along the coast south of Barahona were unsuccessful, despite several hours of intensive observation.

At Laguna del Rincón, we found a Forster's Tern (*Sterna forsteri*), two Gull-billed Terns (*Sterna nilotica*), and eight Caspian Terns (*Sterna caspia*). At Lago Enriquillo, **1.3 km** (0.8 mi) north of Baitoa, we saw Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*) and a flock of 111 Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*). A single adult American Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*), molting into winter plumage, was observed on **the sand-bed** about 100 m **inland (2)** from the waterfront, and about 10 Black Terns (*Chlidonias niger*) were hunting over the water. Here we found our only Antillean Nighthawk (*Chordeiles gundlachii*). Just after 17:00 hr, we heard about 10 White-necked Crows going to roost at La Zorza.

25 September. – In the morning only three Burrowing Owls were flushed as we drove toward Puerto Escondido. About 3.7 km (2 mi) beyond the three-way crossing at Puerto Escondido, we heard Hispaniolan Nightjars and Helmeted Guineafowl (*Numida meleagris*) calling.

After four days of unfulfilled effort searching for the Flat-billed Vireo in suitable habitat, we re-doubled our efforts by using playbacks of its vocalizations at stops every **0.8** km (0.5 mi) from the National Park sign, the highest site for this species according to other reports, down toward Puerto Escondido. On our second stop a bird flew up to the MD-player, fluttered for about a second and disappeared again, without being identified. At our fifth stop, **4.2** km (2.6 mi) downhill from the National Park sign, a Flat-billed Vireo silently hopped and flew short distances to within about 1 m of the MD-player.

Thereafter, we turned uphill again, playing the vocal recordings for other species and hearing Ruddy Quail-Doves (*Geotrygon montana*) and Hispaniolan Lizard-Cuckoos. A Key West Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon chrysia*) called at **22.7** km (14.1 mi) from the three-way-cross and **9.5** km (5.9 mi) before the military checkpoint. Again searching for Golden Swallows around “The Bulldozer,” we only found Tree Swallows foraging around the military checkpoint.

26 September. – We found six White-cheeked Pintails (*Anas bahamensis*) at Los Cocos en route to Pedernales. (4). We searched for rails in the wetlands along the side of the road to Cabo Rojo, but found none. Felíz noted that there was more water than usual, which limited the possibility of locating rails. Nevertheless, we did encounter White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*), Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*), and Yellow Warbler (*Denroica petechia*).

From the viaduct at the main road we drove uphill (3) 14.5 km (9 mi) to Acetillar **where** we heard an Eastern Chat-Tanager just before entering the pine forest. Here we also saw our first Antillean Euphonia (*Euphonia musica*), as well as two Antillean Piculets. Although Felíz informed us that Tawny-shouldered Blackbirds (*Agelaius humeralis*) can be found along the pine forest edge during the breeding season, when they are quite vocal and, therefore, easy to locate, we failed to find them. The only White-crowned Pigeons (*Columba leucocephala*) during our trip were seen here.

On our way back to the main road, while still in the pine forest, Mr Felíz heard a Gray-crowned Palm-Tanager (*Phaenicophilus poliocephalus*) at **33.0** km (20.5 mi) from the viaduct (about **2.4** km [1.5 mi] above Acetillar). The bird was observed, and the Black-crowned Palm-Tanager was also seen here. The White-winged Crossbill was quite common at these elevations in the Caribbean pine (*Pinus caribaea*) forest.

Still seeking the Golden Swallow, we crossed the Sierra de **Baoruco**, but had to settle for Cave Swallows (*Hirundo fulva*) which were more common than expected at these elevations. Before leaving the rain forest on our descent of the **eastern (5)** slope, we stopped to study some parakeets, and found them to be Olive-throated Parakeets (*Aratinga nana*), a species only recently discovered in this area (Raffaele *et al.*: 309). We tried again for Ridgway’s Hawk after leaving the rain forest, but again were unsuccessful. Felíz told us the hawk is seen most often over the dry, semi-open country between the foothills and Puerto Escondido.

At 19:00 we were back in Barahona. Mr Felíz offered to help us in our search for and Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*) the next day.

27 September. – At Buelta de Cariño about 1.6 km (10 mi) south of Barahona, we searched for Gray-headed Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon caniceps*) and Black-whiskered Vireo (*Vireo altiloquus*). Although quail-doves were flushed five times while we were walking a path, we were not able to identify them to species. We did, however, manage to identify three Ruddy Quail-Doves. After a long search we managed to see Black-whiskered Vireo. An Antillean Piculet was also present in the area.

At the “Beach area”, **south of** Barahona, we encountered a Mangrove Cuckoo. About **3.2** km (2 mi) north of Barahona, we saw two Olive-throated Parakeets crossing the road.

Puerto Rico

27 September. – At the Palo Colorado Picnic Area of the Caribbean National Forest, we heard a Puerto Rican Screech-Owl (*Otus nudipes*) at 21:30 hr.

28 September. – Amid heavy morning rain, a Puerto Rican Tanager (*Nesospingus speculiferus*) was observed in the Palo Colorado area of the Caribbean National Forest. On our drive to Humacao, we observed the first Greater Antillean Grackle (*Quiscalus niger*) in Puerto Rico near the coast opposite Maizales. Although abundant in Puerto Rico, **we found** the grackle difficult to **see on (6)** Hispaniola.

At the parking lot of the Humacao Refuge, we saw Pearly-eyed Thrasher (*Margarops fuscatus*) and Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager (*Spindalis portoricensis*). Some flowering trees next to the parking lot attracted Antillean Crested Hummingbirds (*Orthorhynchus cristatus*) and Puerto Rican Woodpecker (*Melanerpes portoricensis*). We walked the unpaved road from the parking lot past the second bridge, where we turned right. After 50-75 m, we found a single West Indian Whistling-Duck in the first pond. In a nearby pond we found two

Caribbean Coots (*Fulica caribaea*), which were greatly outnumbered by American Coots (*Fulica americana*) and the more than 50 Pied-billed Grebes and several Ruddy Ducks (*Oxyura jamaicensis*).

We found many of the African species, Orange-cheeked Waxbill (*Estrilda melpoda*), and also a small finch, all black except for a few irregular whitish blotches on its head, singing. The latter was a species of *Volatina*, *Melanospiza*, *Tiaris*, *Oryzoborus*, *Amauruspiza*, or *Sporophila*.

On our way through Arrojo, toward Guánica State Forest, we saw a Pin-tailed Whydah (*Vidua macroura*). Near Juana Díaz, we searched for Masked Duck (*Nomonyx dominica*), but found only Ruddy Ducks and Caribbean Coots. Arriving at Guánica State Forest at 22:15 h, we walked the road into the reserve for about 2.4 km and back, regularly playing the MD-player for Puerto Rican Nightjar (*Caprimulgus noctitherus*), but none responded. Several Puerto Rican Screech-Owls called. Mr Gustafsson teased them with a “guttural” sound, which apparently excited the owls, which ventured close to us. **Two birds, probably** male and female kept “barking” together, causing a sound reminiscent of the laugh of the Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo gigas*) of Australia.

29 September. – We re-entered the Guánica State Reserve at 04:40 h, walked the same road but a bit further, and again playing the MD for the nightjar. At 05:45 h, we had our first response from a Puerto Rican Nightjar, an individual which kept calling. On our return, another five nightjars were heard. Several Black-whiskered Vireos, Mangrove Cuckoos, and Caribbean Elaenias (*Elaenia martinica*) were singing. We saw our first Puerto Rican Tody (*Todus mexicanus*) here.

At Playa la Parguera, we encountered a few Yellow-shouldered Blackbirds (*Agelaius xanthomus*) at the waterfront opposite the mangrove.

We returned to Guánica State Forest where, from 08:30 to 10:30 h, we observed at least four Puerto Rican Vireos (*Vireo latimeri*), as many Puerto Rican Flycatchers (*Myiarcus antillarum*), two Adelaide’s Warblers (*Dendroica adalaidae*), and several Caribbean Elaenias, Puerto Rican Todies, Puerto Rican Bullfinches (*Loxigilla portoricensis*), Mangrove Cuckoos, and Puerto Rican Emerald (*Chlorostilbon maugaeus*).

At 16:00 h, we watched for Elfin Woods Warbler (*Dendroica angelae*) at the 16.2-km post at Centro Vacacional at Maricao. Ranger Adrian Muñiz suggested that we watch for the warbler early in the morning at a gate opposite the entrance to Centro Vacacional.

30 September – From 06:20 to 06:50 h, we saw 4-5 Elfin Woods Warblers at the site suggested by Muñiz. Activity slowed considerably after this, but we saw warblers a couple of more times during the next half-hour. Elfin Woods Warbler appears to move through vegetation at all levels and is quite active. It preferably left vegetation from a high level, flew about 50 m, and landed in low vegetation. Other species noted here were Puerto Rican Vireo, Puerto Rican Tanager, Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager, Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Emerald, and Scaly-naped Pigeon (*Columba squamosa*).

At the 9.3-km post near Centro Vacacional, a Puerto Rican Pewee (*Contopus portoricensis*) appeared immediately, landing in the top of a tree 1 m from the 9.3-km post! Other observations noted were two Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoos (*Saurothera vielloiti*), two Elfin Woods Warblers, and two singing Puerto Rican Vireos.

At Hacienda Juanita we observed Green Mango (*Anthrocothorax viridis*).

1 October – We birded the 100 m along the entrance road to Hacienda Juanita. Between 07:00 and 09:00 h, several endemic birds became active, including Puerto Rican Woodpecker, Puerto Rican Tanager, Puerto Rican Pewee, Puerto Rican Stripe-headed Tanager, Puerto Rican Tody, Puerto Rican Flycatcher, Puerto Rican Emerald, Green Mango, Loggerhead Kingbird (*Tyrannus caudifasciatus*), Pearly-eyed Thrasher, Red-legged Thrush (*Turdus plumbeus*) and Nutmeg Mannikin (*Lonchura punctulata*).

At a 90-degree left turn on road PR681 1.9 km (1.2 mi) from Barceloneta, we found three male Northern Bishops (*Euplectes franciscana*) in display.

Along the northern Puerto Rico coast, we observed some movements of seabirds offshore, probably both foraging and migrating. Large numbers of terns, maybe a thousand, were seen. Most were Sandwich Terns (*Sterna sandvicensis*), but maybe a hundred Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*), four Bridled Terns (*Sterna anaethetus*), three Brown Boobies, and five Parasitic Jaegers (*Stercoraria parasiticus*) were seen.

2 October – With U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, Jafet Valdéz, we began the hike into an observation platform in the Caribbean National Forest about half an hour before sunrise. The platform provided an overview of the Espíritu Santo Valley, where we watched for the endangered Puerto Rican Parrot (*Amazona vittata*). In total, we observed 8-12 parrots.

At Luquillo, we searched for Green-throated Carib (*Sericotes holoseiceus*), finding a brilliant male foraging in a garden on Calle B in the afternoon. Terns and Boobies flew past offshore.

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1. Unidentified Grackles. We saw these birds at some distance. I here have overlooked the fact that "Grackle" in the caribbean area is only *Quiscalus*. The birds at the edge of the lake were not *Quiscalus*. They were probably mainly Shiny Cowbirds, but we were hoping that Tawny Shouldered Blackbirds could have reached this far east on the island and thus be present in the flock. Thus the correct way of expressing no 1 would be "a flock of unidentified *Icterini*. Since the probability that they would be anything else than Shining Cowbirds, I well understand if you prefer to exclude this sentence.
2. I believe "sand-bank" implies that the bird was standing on a bank in the water. The bird was standing on the sandy bed which as far as we understand is the bottom of the lake when water is high. The bird was standing about 100 meters inland from the waterfront. You may express it any way you find suitable. I just don't want to make people believe it was on a bank in the lake. (-whatever importance that may have)
3. The viaduct is in the intersection between the main road between Barahuna and Pedernales. The road from Cabo Rojo ascending the sloapes of Sierra de Baoruco is running through the viaduct under the main road. I have found that to be a good landmark where to start the trip-meter. (compare: "acqueductus")
4. Some words excluded
5. The road winds towards the north from the coast, but once having passes the pass it winds eastwards towards Duvergé.

- 6 Our experience from the island of Hispaniola is rather limited. We can only say that "we found it difficult to see on Hispaniola". Whether it really is difficult to see on the island as a whole, we really have too little experience to say.
- 7 The name El Aguaqate I have found on thr map. I don't know wether it is spelled otherwise too, but I have changed it to the spelling I have seen.
- 8 It seems you have calculated miles to kilometers by using the nautic mile 1,85x meters, while the "English mile" is 1,609 meters. I have re-calculated the figures. I believe the "Mile" you used in America, and which is still used in cars on land is the "English mile"