

## BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 3/2013:

# DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, DECEMBER 2012



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In December 2012, I entered the Dominican Republic twice: first on the 14th to 15th, in transit between flights from New York and to San Juan, Puerto Rico, and second, between 22nd and 31st December. During the first stay, the night was spent at Villa Capri, Boca Chica, with a short period of birding before returning to the airport, in connection with canceled Air France flight and rerouting via Puerto Rico, on my own expense. The second visit was a ten day birding trip with the aim of seeing as many regional endemics as possible. My route was Las Americas International Airport - Boca Chica (1 night) – Sabana de la Mar – Los Haitises National Park (2 nights) – Barahona – Cachote – Barahona (1 night) – Alcoa Road – Pedernales (1 night) – Alcoa Road/Cabo Rojo – Duverge – Puerto Escondido (3 nights) – Eastern Sierra de Neiba (W end) – Barahona (1 night) – Las Americas.



Fig. 1. Hispaniolan Woodpecker – one of the most abundant endemic species on the island.

## PRACTICALITIES

I did consult a number of trip reports before visiting the island. Among them, the most useful one was made by Herve Jacob (see [surfbids.com](http://surfbids.com)), not only because it was based on February 2012 situation, but because Herve and Noelle did it by themselves in 22 days, making accurate notes on accessibility, the key issue in the Dominican Republic. Much obliged, Herve!

### Car

One needs a proper 4x4 car to deal with the mountain tracks and potholed highways of the Dominican Republic. I rented a Nissan Frontier at Alamo, with a quite favorable Internet rate of 67 USD per day, excluding VAT but including a proper insurance and all the other fees. Waiting for the clerk and making the papers took 45 minutes at the airport, with no other customers. The vehicle enabled visiting both Cachote and the new Sierra de Neiba site (more below) with relative ease. It worked very well on highways, as well.

On the other hand, the weather was fine during the visit, with short rain showers only once at Los Haitises National Park, and the tracks therefore a bit easier than average to deal with. Furthermore, I already had more than 150.000 km of 4x4 driving under my belt, in a variety of demanding environments, and could make it without a scratch. On return, make sure to go to the arrivals at Las Americas, and take the car rental entrance. It is not well signposted; a tree may obscure the first sign. Entering the public parking next door will create trouble and delay things by half-an-hour. I did that, based on an earlier report, and learned my lesson in two parking ticket lines. The Alamo people refused to help in the process.

### Money

It is best to avoid changing money at the airport, if possible. Their (hidden) commission is about 25%. It is much better to do it at, for example, Carib Express offices, present in most towns on the way. They provide an excellent rate and fast service (you need an ID). There is one particularly convenient one in Sabana de la Mar: Entering the town, proceed till a large roundabout with flags, past Western Union, and take the second turn to the right. Carib Express is on the left along the street (100 USD = P4.000 in Dec 2012). Villa Capri also gave change to US dollars in pesos, according to the official rate. I changed all the money I needed in the beginning, changing the remaining pesos to dollars on departure. Departure area rates were slightly more attractive than the arrival ones.

### Security

Santo Domingo has somewhat negative reputation. The rural areas, on the other hand, appeared to be quite safe. I did not encounter any problems with the locals, excluding an argument with an officer at Jimani military checkpoint, when he demanded to see my non-existing entry stamp for the day, believing that I had arrived from Haiti. Driving the Road 47 (Sierra de Neiba) track felt a bit



uncomfortable at times, because the locals clearly were suspicious of me, so close to the border and in a place seldom, if ever, visited by a tourist (who looked like an Americano in combat gear).

At La Placa, Sierra Baoruco, I gave a lift to two young men in need (the only time I did this), but was informed by the local military that they were illegal immigrants who had just crossed the border, and had no documents on them. Not willing to get involved with the situation at the next checkpoint, I told them to get off and walk to Puerto Escondido, instead.

Unless one gets involved with the petty criminals at tourist areas, and the activities they provide, traffic probably is the main security hazard in the Dominican Republic. In that regard, I would like to warn other birders of the meandering coastal road south of Barahona, to Oviedo. Be alert! This is a particularly deceiving highway, with good tarmac but a narrow one and with surprise tire-breaking potholes, many speed pumps and people and animals on the road, right next to steep cliffs. I encountered two serious accidents on this stretch in five minutes: first, a SUV had just ended on its side, and second, another vehicle had made the leap of death down the cliffs. In both situations, no obvious reasons for the accidents were visible, the main reason probably being a combination of too much speed, oncoming traffic and potholes.



Fig. 2. Paraiso Cano Hondo, at Los Haitises. My room was the one with long balcony, in the center. It clearly was an upgrade, perhaps an excuse of my problems in making the reservation.

## Accommodation

The Dominican Republic has a large variety of accommodation to offer. Here are the places where I stayed:

Villa Capri ([www.hotelvillacapri.net](http://www.hotelvillacapri.net)) is at Boca Chica, right along the Highway 3, on the right just after the signposted turn off to the Boca Chica Beach (*playa*). With Italian ownership and decor, it is an economical stopover close to the Las Americas airport. A taxi to Villa Capri, prearranged with the hotel, is secure but and expensive at USD 25 one way. There is guarded parking at the hotel premises. The rooms cost USD 40 – 50 per night, depending on facilities (kitchen or not), and they have cable television. The surroundings may be noisy in the evenings, just like in any Dominican town, and there is no restaurant. Snacks are, however, available. Bring your ear plugs and enjoy the comfortable, affordable and clean rooms when entering or leaving the country. The manager spoke fluent English and the others also a little bit (I speak some Spanish myself).

Paraiso Cano Hondo ([www.paraisocanohondo.com](http://www.paraisocanohondo.com)) is a lodge style operation with unique architecture and unbeatable access to birding, right at the edge of Los Haitises national park, in the vicinity of Sabana de la Mar. Making a reservation was a drag with initially non-existing response to customer inquiries, but after arrival everything was worth the room rate, P2.000 (USD 50) for single occupancy. I got a large and airy room (no need for fans or air con) with very comfortable amenities and a nice view, and had my dinners at a separate restaurant closer to the entrance to the area. The dinners were not too expensive at around P300, drinks included, and a rather obnoxious White-necked Crow offered endless entertainment with its antics and operatic song performances, to the annoyance of its competitors, the restaurant's dogs. The people spoke English well enough.

Hostal d'Oleo Mendez ([www.viajeros.com/alojamiento/hosteria/hostal-doleo-mendez](http://www.viajeros.com/alojamiento/hosteria/hostal-doleo-mendez)) at Pedernales had reasonable rooms and safe street-side parking for economical P800 per night in an air-conditioned room. It was possible to leave and enter any time of the day or night, but there was no night security. Moreover, in case one desired to have a meal, it had to be ordered no later than six hours earlier. On the other hand, there was a village shop and a small restaurant close by, just when you enter the town. A chicken and fried banana dinner cost P120 there, and was delicious. The hostel itself is also well located for early trips to the Alcoa Road and Cabo Rojo, with minimal street driving (speed bumps, ditches). The manager did not speak any English.

Hotel El Quemaito ([www.hotelquemaito.com](http://www.hotelquemaito.com)), south of Barahona, was the easiest one to reserve, with a Norwegian manager and a reservation service in Germany, with prompt and informative replies. The junction had only one small sign pointing to a gravel track. There was a village shop right next to it (drinks, snacks). The room was comfortable for USD 72 per night, as it should be for the rate, and the food the best I had in the Dominican Republic. The meals were, however, pricey, dinners starting at P475 for a main course, without drinks. Breakfast was included and both fresh and of high quality. On the first visit, when I left too early, they made a breakfast box for me. The place is gated with security, day and night. Some of staff spoke English (and German) quite well.



Villa Barrancoli (Kate Wallace's Camp; [katetody@gmail.com](mailto:katetody@gmail.com)), at Puerto Escondido, Sierra de Baoruco, had two-bed cabins with partly net walls for P400 per night, single occupancy. The cabin I got had both electric light and an outlet for charging one's batteries or for other such uses. There were two showers with hot water and two toilets for the guests, after one learner to control the water pump and valve (easy). The gate was opened according to my needs, at 5 AM if needed, and other requests were also attended with similar hospitality. The days were reasonably cool at the cabins, with a peak of mosquitoes towards sunset (nets are provided for the beds). After sunset, the mosquitoes disappeared and the nights were rather cold (bring a sleeping bag or a blanket to complement the one available). Geckos and spiders share the cabin with you.

The downside was the dinner arrangement. The lady of the house demanded a whopping P600 for a plate of rice and four pieces of chicken (cf. prices at other accommodations); enough to buy 200 yellow bananas at a road stall! Needless to say, I only dined there once. There is a reasonably well-stocked *supermercado* in Duverge, on the left about one-and-half blocks after the Shell petrol station. All in all, I was however, very happy with the services. The family who runs the place did not speak any English.



Fig. 3. The map of the Rabo de Gato trail, at the entrance of Villa Barrancoli.

## SITES AND SPECIES

A conventional set of birding sites was visited during the ten day journey, with the exception of a new location on the eastern end of Sierra de Neiba. The exploration became necessary because a hurricane had washed away the Zapoten Road at Sierra de Baoruco (restoration make take some time), often stated to be the only chance to see a La Selle Thrush, Western Chat-Tanager and White-winged Warbler on the island. With the initiative, I was able to see two of these enigmatic species. Given an extra day at Pedernales, the third one could possibly have been located, too (Perhaps some day in Haiti, together with Grey-crowned Palm-Tanager). Individual traveling birders have flexibility on their side and may visit locations possibly too time-consuming and risky for groups.

The following information only includes the main target species, and some others, out of a total list of 124 species recorded in 10 days. All in all, finding the birds was not a problem in the Dominican Republic. The access to their habitats occasionally was.

### Boca Chica

Not really a place to observe feathered birds but the hotel offered some nice potential for bird photography in the morning and a surprise waited in the nearby mangroves, in the form of the recently split Hispaniolan Kingbird, which had a territorial fight with a pair of Grey Kingbirds, beating them. My only other Hispaniolan Kingbird was at Cachote, driving down from the Eco-Lodge site. At La Placa, I did not bother to do the trail, having seen each of its potential species at the previous locations en route.

### Los Haitises National Park

The road to Sabana de la Mar is of variable quality. On Highway 3, it is possible to drive about 110 km/h (speed limit 80 km/h). Towards Hato Mayor, the road is slower but in good shape. Afterwards, crossing the mountains, there is plenty of road work and bad sections. At La Valle, the road improves again and keeps on being good till Sabana. The Los Haitises access road, on the other hand, is slow and severely potholed in places. It took me 2 hours to drive from Boca Chica to Sabana de la Mar, before sunrise and early after it, when there was little traffic on the roads.

In order to see Ridgway's Hawks, I walked 50 meters uphill from the lodge, up right on a path and down to a wooden gate. Unlike earlier in 2012 (cf. Herve Jacob's report), the hawks were not in the valley on the left, but across the main valley. One pair was occasionally circling above their territory in the far left, and apparently another one in the far right. There were several pairs of Red-tailed Hawks in the air space, as well.

I made no attempt to go all the way to their nest sites, as there was no desire to disturb the critically endangered species, not to mention the muddy trails of these valleys. There were a plenty of cows and few bulls (friendly animals) in the area, and they had made a mess of the damp



terrain. Plenty of cow pies, too. Instead, I waited at suitable observation points, scanning the sky after having searched the nearby valleys for other goodies.

These included at least eight pairs of White-necked Crows, visible and vocal mainly early in the morning, in addition to the tame one at the lodge, and a total of seven Hispaniolan Orioles, mostly in the far left valley. Other notable birds included a White-crowned Pigeon, Broad-billed Todies, Antillean Piculets, Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoos, Black-crowned Palm-Tanagers, Stolid Flycatchers and the ubiquitous Palm Chats and Hispaniolan Woodpeckers. My search for them was extensive enough to produce wet and muddy trekking sandals. It was important to have a replacement pair in the suitcase. The wet pair was washed and later dried up on the sunny front panel of my Nissan.

There is plenty to see besides the birds and the cattle. My most memorable other record was a group of 120 caterpillars which suddenly dropped themselves, simultaneously, from a branch one meter above me, stopping midway to the ground. With their silk threads, they formed a pretty living curtain in the air. I guess it was about escaping some sort of predation.



Fig. 4. The wooden gate. There are valleys to the left, far left and to the right.





Fig. 5. Down in the valleys between the limestone hills, things tend to get muddy...

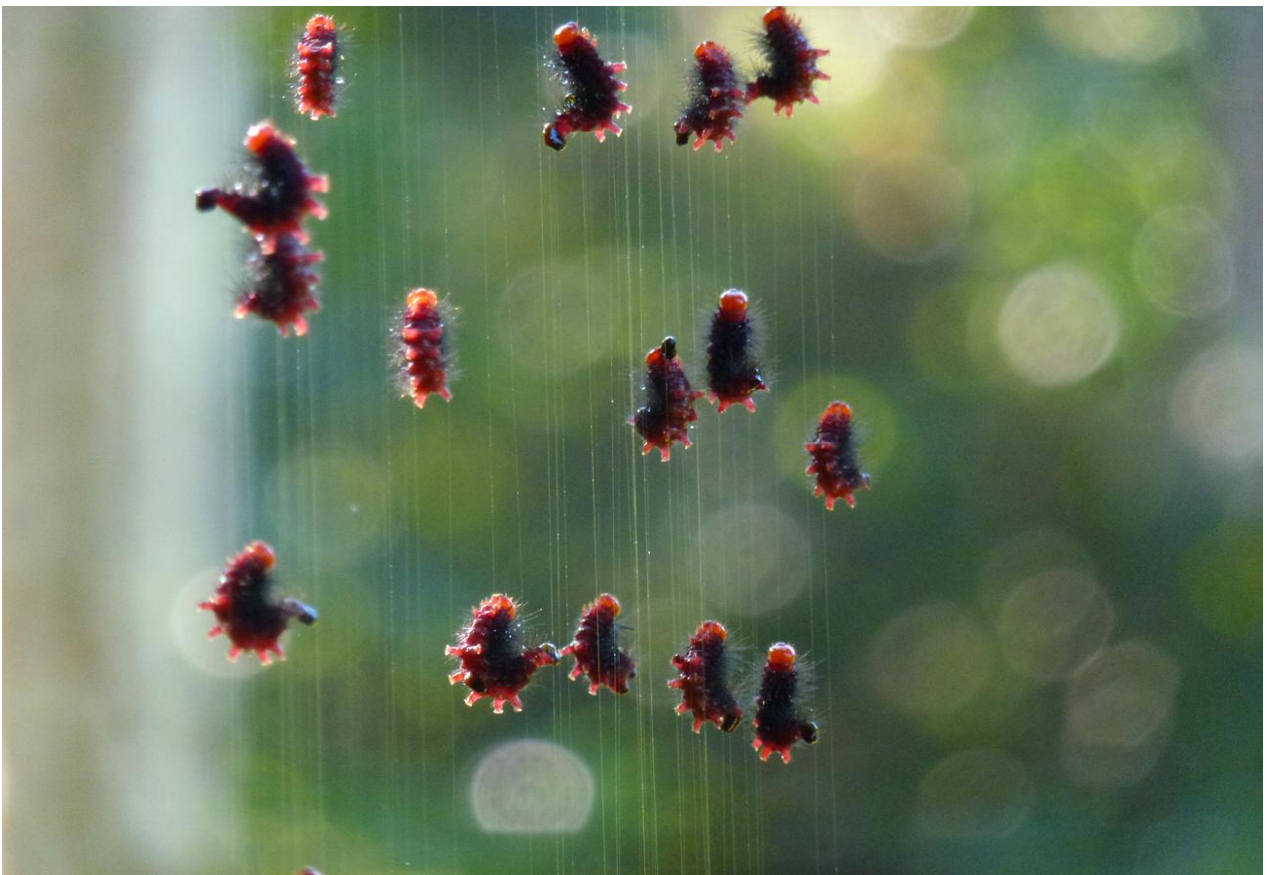


Fig. 6. At one point, a 'curtain' of 120 of these cuties simultaneously appeared from a tree.



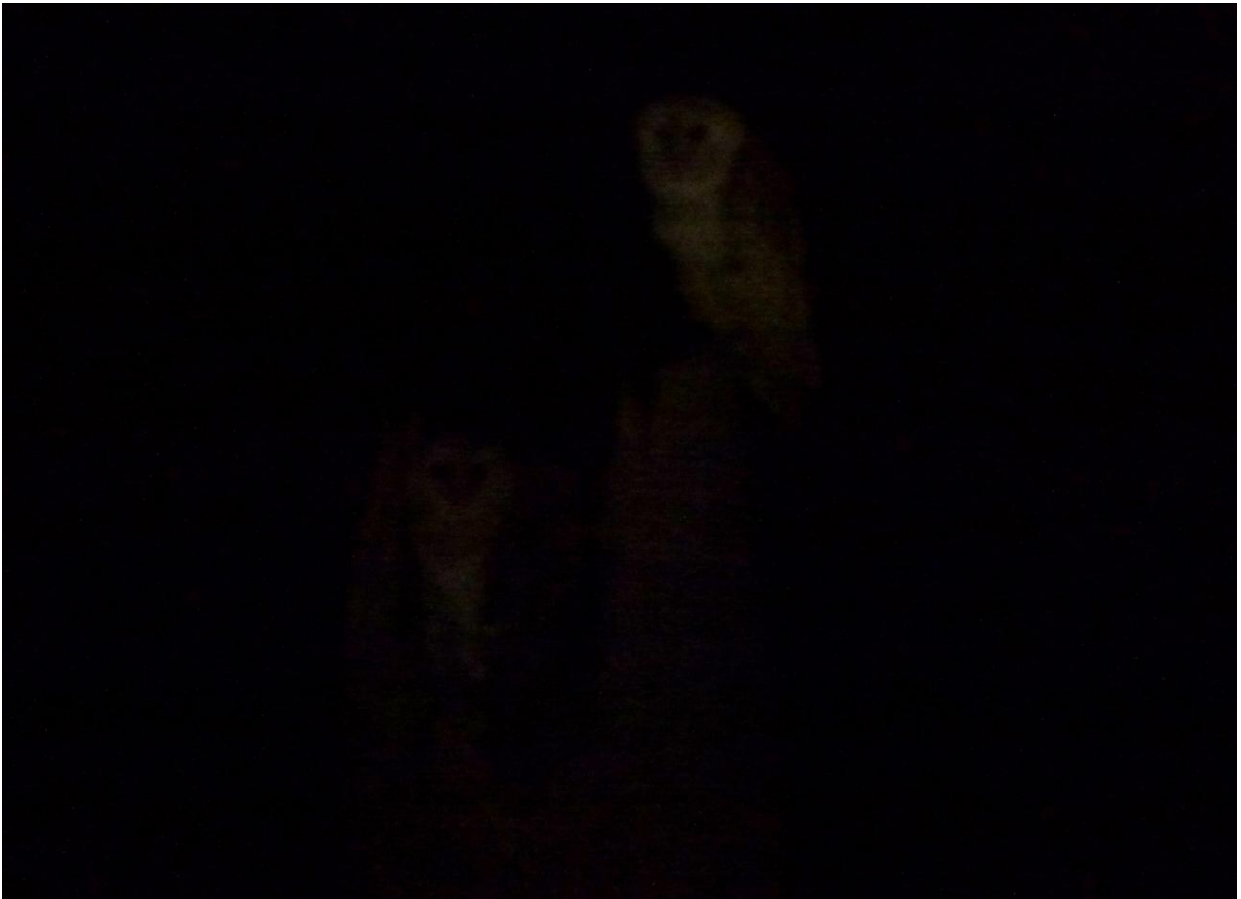


Fig. 7. A pair of Ashy-faced Owls at their nest, in the glow of car lights.

A pair of Ashy-faced Owls occupied the most obvious stump of a palm right next to the access road, a bit more than two kilometers towards Sabana de la Mar. They came out well after sunset, in complete darkness. In order to not to disturb them, I did not use a flash in photographing them with my Lumix. During the same owling trip, two more individuals were heard and one seen crossing the road further on towards the Yabon River.

Another nice place for observation were the large 'shrimp pools' below the lodge, towards the Los Haitises park office and a boat ramp. Some of the area's many Limpkins were visible there, with an assortment of shorebirds and egrets, and passerines such as Louisiana Waterthrush. All in all, Los Haitises was a pleasant introduction to the birds of the Dominican Republic and a good chance to rest after arrival, not to mention and obtain water, food and money for the rest of the trip, at the relaxed Sabana de la Mar.

Time available, it might not be a bad idea to join a boat ride to the bay area, starting at the national park boat ramp. Ask about it at the lodge and they will contact the guy who runs the operation.



Fig. 8. A pair of Limpkins at the Los Haitises 'shrimp ponds', just before sunset.

#### Cachote

On the Christmas Day morning, I made the longest drive of the trip, all the way from Los Haitises to Barahona and Cachote, and back to my hotel El Quemaito. The timing could not have been better. Before sunrise, drinking parties still forced a few slow-downs at Sabana and La Valle. The center of Santo Domingo, on the other hand, was deserted later in the morning, allowing exploration for highway intersections (poorly signposted, to say the least). I got lost for one and half hours, never really discovering the right junctions. Also at San Cristobal, Bani and Azua, the traffic was clearly lighter than normal, if compared to my departure date, December 31st. I was in Barahona at 11.20, after five hours and twenty minutes.

After leaving my bags in Room 1 at El Quemaito, I continued straight away to La Cienaga, further south along the coast, and readily identified the correct track to Cachote (white stones), requesting confirmation from the locals. They agreed it was the right way, but shook their heads and mentioned that there would be '*mas problemas*'. Somewhat disturbingly, a common encouragement was '*Vaya con Dios!*' It was indeed a rough track, ascending to the hills between some rows of huts and small houses. If you are able to do the first 500 meters, there probably are will be no major problems later on. A low 4x4 drive is a must right from the beginning.

It was not a pleasure but I had no major problems going up, slowly and carefully in order to not damage the undercarriage. At km 9 Y-crossing, a right turn was taken. Some distance afterwards,



after an antenna, another Y followed, with a 'roundabout' best passed from the left before continuing to the right. More directions were asked at a lonely farm house higher up (take the left at the new building, under construction in Dec 2012), before reaching the Eco-Lodge sign to the right (km 15), at the bottom of a steep hill, more easily negotiated up than down. Thereafter, it was straightforward and I parked my vehicle at the first gate (km 16+) of the apparently abandoned lodge. The people on the way were friendly and I also met the three most beautiful women of the trip along this track.

A short distance uphill, a trail leaves the track to the left, down to a forested ravine. I did the trail up to the second wooden bridge (500 m?), the both bridges being derelict, and back, and finished my birding from the road around the main gate. The ride uphill took one hour 15 minutes and the downhill one hour forty minutes; a testament to Nissan Frontier's capacities. It was necessary to go slower down to maintain full control in the more slippery situations.

Originally, I had reserved time for three visits in Cachote in my trip plan, to try to compensate the closure of Zapoten. In the light of later discoveries, this turned out to be unnecessary. The initial afternoon visit produced an inquisitive Eastern Chat-Tanager (second bridge) and another one calling 200 meters earlier, my first Green-tailed Warbler, seven Narrow-billed Todies, two Hispaniolan Emeralds, five Hispaniolan Trogons, a Bicknell's Thrush and several Rufous-throated Solitaires (subspecies *montanus*), in addition to the already mentioned Hispaniolan Kingbird.



Fig. 9. Finally there! My Nissan Frontier at the Cachote Eco-Lodge gate.



## Alcoa Road (El Aceitillar)

This was my favorite site in the Dominican Republic, with excellent observation conditions, more birds than I was able to attend, complete peace, cool and clear air, and fragrant smell of pines. The first visit was started from El Quemaito, with a departure at 5.10 AM. The drive to Cabo Rojo was slower than anticipated, with many settlements and a missing major bridge in the beginning, but I nevertheless arrived well on time, just after 7 AM, driving 110 km/h on some straight sections after Oveido. Sunrise may be at 7 AM, but the slopes really warm up and birds come out closer to 7.40 AM.

On approach, a singing Flat-billed Vireo was located along the main highway, few kilometers east of the Cabo Rojo junction, and two Northern Bobwhites ran across the Alcoa Road, in between several monster tarantulas. In my hurry, I initially missed the poorly signposted junction. The main road crosses the paved Alcoa Road by a bridge and the ramps are but narrow gravel tracks. Keep your eyes open when entering a hilly section and the road bridge.



Fig. 10. One of the many monster tarantulas on Alcoa Road; larger than a man's hand!

The second visit was in the afternoon of the same day, after securing a room and groceries in Pedernales. Leaving for Pedernales after sunset, I met a local motorbiking hero, instantly nicknamed (by me) 'El Loco', with well-deserved capital letters. He had no lights and therefore



preferred to speed just behind or in front of cars to Pedernales, 80 to 110 km/h, in the middle of stray cows and the occasional pothole. Whenever a car approached from an opposite direction, I had it really hard to estimate where he was in front of me...

The third visit was made in the following morning, between 6 and 11 AM, after a night in Pedernales. The lower part of the road had little interest for me, but things really got interesting after the first row of pines (left, between two side tracks) in a right hand curve. There are a few pines by the road earlier on, but no rows. As one ascends the road, the whole section on the left has abundant streamside vegetation, broad-leaf trees and bushes mixed with pines. Further up on the left, there is an obvious place to stop, The Spot, before the next curve to the left.

This is where I saw most of my birds on Alcoa Road: A Sharp-shinned Hawk, small groups of Hispaniolan Parakeets and up to 50 roosting Parrots (the noise they created was only challenged by the many feral Junglefowl), Scaly-naped (mostly) and Plain Pigeons, Greater Antillean Elaenias, six species of *Dendroica* warblers, Black-crowned Palm-Tanagers, Broad-billed Todies, Green-tailed Warblers, one Rufous-throated Solitaire, Stolid Flycatchers, Antillean Euphonias and Black Swifts, among other things. At night, the area had at least five calling Hispaniolan Nightjars and a number of Burrowing Owls, lower down. Hispaniolan Emeralds occurred here and there in the pine forest.



Fig. 11. One of the several Green-tailed Warblers in roadside bushes, at The Spot.

My only Hispaniolan Palm Crow of the trip was seen from this location, with the rest of the party calling from a valley below it (cf. Lago Enriquillo). One of the Green-tailed Warblers had albinistic features, with snow white spots on wings below its alulas and more white on the primaries. This created a superficial resemblance to a White-winged Warbler but otherwise the bird was just like its fellow warblers. A singing La Selle Thrush was a welcome surprise, even though I had already seen an unidentified large thrush in the same area, just before sunrise. The song was exactly like the recording at Xeno Canto. Post-breeding dispersal or more regular, unnoticed occurrence?

The next straight section of ascend, till a right hand curve, was also very productive, with excellent views of Antillean Piculets, for example. Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanagers were particularly numerous there, as well. The La Charca reservoir, with an information table on birds, was empty of passerines on all visits. There was plenty of water around, the lowlands ('dry bush') being flooded after the autumn's hurricanes.

The section towards the Hoyo de Palempito viewpoint (gate, entrance fee) and the gated start of the Sierra Baoruco Trail/Track (presumably, to Puerto Escondido!) was relatively dull, but nevertheless provided the best views of Hispaniolan Pewees, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a few Red-legged Thrushes (more in general area, and at other sites), a Golden Swallow, and an assortment of wintering warblers. The 'Gates Area', between the above-mentioned two gates, was particularly good for Hispaniolan Parrots, Hispanional Crossbills (first two hours after sunrise), Golden Swallows (one individual stayed there for hours) and Antillean Siskins (a fly-by party of five).



Fig. 12. A Golden Swallow approaching!



## Cabo Rojo

At Cabo Rojo, the wetland by the military area, the port entrance, produced a selection of more widespread species such as Roseate Spoonbill, White Ibis, Caribbean Coot and Blue-winged Duck. The best bird probably was a Least Bittern, readily seen on both mid-day visits. A lone Barn Swallow still occupied the ponds (cf. Herve Jacob's February report). The sea had, among other things, two juvenile Brown Boobies. I bet this could be a good point to search for a Black-capped Petrel, late in the evening, if somebody had time for such seawatching experiments. The species is supposed to breed on the mountains of the Haiti-DR borderland, La Selle to Barouco.

## Rabo de Gato (Tail of a Cat)

To reach this area, one only needs to walk forward from Villa Barrancoli at Puerto Escondido. The access to the trail is well signposted in the village, even though the road is narrow and was a bit flooded in places. In the beginning of the trail, there was a parking area on the right and a small shrine on the left. Crossing a low hill, one enters the forest proper with ponds (Least Grebes etc.) and a stream. By the ponds, some local guys with motorbikes occasionally cooked bananas, played music and socialized, disturbing the birds and birders in the afternoons. After their fireplace (rocks on the ground), the trail makes another slight climb, the peak being an opening to the left, with derelict picnic tables partly hidden under fallen branches.

This and the next 200 meters, before crossing the stream, are the core area of the trail. I went all the way, discovering more stunted and dry forest, next to agricultural fields. The whole area was great for quail-doves, with a number of records on both Key West (7) and Hispaniolan (White-fronted) Quail-Doves (5), and the odd Ruddy Ground-Doves. Zenaida Doves and Scaly-naped Pigeons were there, too. Among the key target species, Bay-breasted Cuckoo proved to be difficult, being spotted only twice on four visits, once calling and once flying. A party of four Antillean Siskins appeared to be resident at the high trees by the picnic tables. December is the time for their altitudinal migrations.

Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoos and Broad-billed Todies were very common, together with abundant Palmchats and Hispaniolan Woodpeckers. Other species included Stolid Flycatchers, Hispaniolan Pewees, White-necked Crows, Hispaniolan Parakeets and Parrots, and a good selection of wintering North American passerines such as Worm-eating Warblers, a Black-throated Green Warbler and Ovenbirds. A Kentucky Warbler apparently was a good find.

Bit surprisingly, in the light of earlier reports, a pair of Green-tailed Warblers was also seen there. A Flat-billed Vireo, on the other hand, was recorded only once. Groups of Hispaniolan Orioles were encountered twice. A Least Poorwill was, as usual, at Villa Barrancoli. Looking for it was, however, a bit awkward with the people and dogs. I heard the bird twice, the second time being the whistle calls, repeated several times. This was the only target species I did not actually see while in the Dominican Republic. For me, heard species do however count, even though I prefer to see my birds, if possible.



Fig. 13. A Hispaniolan Trogon, high up in the Rabo de Gato canopy.



Fig. 15. A Broadbilled Tody, enjoying a cool of shadow in the afternoon heat.





Fig. 16. A Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo, sunning itself in a trailside bush after a cold night.



Fig. 16. ...and its prey, one of the agile tree lizards of the Antilles.





Fig. 17. Key West Quail-Doves are common at Rabo de Gato trail.

#### La Placa

When entering Puerto Escondido, I stopped at the national park's office (on the right) to buy an entrance ticket, just in case visiting Zapoten (and La Placa) was, after all, possible. This was not expensive at P20 for a person. Later on, I spent the hottest hours of my first day by visiting the damaged road, about 1.5 km beyond La Placa. Absolutely no chance by a 4x4... The locals kept on transporting their agricultural goods to the end of the road on donkeys, to be loaded on waiting pick ups. My only memorable bird record there was a close-by Key West Quail-Dove, just before the La Placa military check point.

#### Lago Enriqueillo

Altogether two afternoons were spent in search for Hispaniolan Palm Crows west of Duverge, especially between Baitoa and Jimani, in vain. I played my recordings on a frequent basis, without result. The lake had flooded the highway in places and had a number of egrets, herons, terns, gulls and shorebirds, and a selection of birds of prey, the best record probably being an Anhinga.





Fig. 18. The Lago Enriquillo floods, west of Baitoa.

#### Road 47, Sierra de Neiba

Not being able to visit Zapoten and having already recorded everything but two species supposedly only available there, I decided to risk an exploration on my last full birding day. It just might be possible to reach the protected Neiba Forest by following Road 47 (exists only on map, but I did not know that) across the mountains. At least the altitude would be no problem. The road, if passable, could be expected to reach heights close to 2.000 meters above the sea level.

I left Villa Barrancoli well before sunrise, for a 1,5 hour drive to Jimani and to the Los Pinos ('Road 47') junction, just before La Decusbierta at the eastern end of Lago Enriquillo. A 29 km climb followed, the road initially being a rough but passable 4x4 track through some good dry forest, all the way up to Los Pinos. A Hispaniolan Nightjar was seen soon after the first ascent. Further on, the track became narrowed, the land was all cleared for cattle and people were aplenty, many of them on horses, mules or donkeys. No smiles but suspicious stares by the people on road, many of whom appeared to be Haitians, with only limited skills in Spanish. At the small village of Sabana Real (see Google Maps), the track, a former road, disappeared under grass, and I continued further up with caution, surprising the owners of more remote farmsteads by my unexpected appearance.



Fig. 19. Most of the roadside habitat is characterized by open grassland; a view to Haiti.

No forest had been seen for a while and it was clear that there was no Road 47 there anymore. At one corner I did, however, get a glimpse of the Neiba Rorest Reserve on the not so distant top of the mountain range. Where the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti lied, I could only guess, as it was not marked in any way and people appeared to cross freely. Then, suddenly, the first trees with lichen appeared and I entered the edge of the forest. As speculatively predicted, I had actually arrived in a humid mountain broad-leaved forest! That itself was a small victory, with no previous knowledge of local conditions.

What was the first bird I saw when getting out of the Nissan? A splendid tame La Selle Thrush! The bird with shiny plumage foraged in a muddy depression by the track for 10 minutes, all the time in full view at close range, but in a difficult spot for pocket camera photography, due to light conditions. Birding was immediately great despite the fact that it was already 9 AM (the 29 km drive up took two-and-half hours). Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanagers were common, just like Narrow-billed Todies, Greater Antillean Elaenias and Hispaniolan Emeralds. The most common passerine was, however, Green-tailed Warbler, and it did not take long before a White-winged Warbler came out, lured by a recording! As a cherry on the cake, a rather inquisitive Eastern Chat-Tanager arrived from a roadside weedy pasture to inspect me, alerted by the White-winged Warbler calls of my mp3-player! Excellent views... Another one sang lower down.





Fig. 20. The end of the road for me. The track is still there, for the time being...



Fig. 21. The edge of the protected Sierra de Neiba Forest, on top of the mountain range.





Fig. 22. My first bird at the site: a La Selle Thrush. The Lumix may not have been able to produce sharp images of a bird of the shadows, but my Leica views were absolutely stunning!

The forest proper could be reached by walking on the track. Going down on damp grass and stones was a bit slippery for the Nissan and the track was narrow, and I had to be very careful in the beginning. It was, however, a joyful 2,5 hours back to the tarmac road. I had taken my chances and succeeded. In case Zapoten remains out of bounds for a prolonged period, this is one option to try to minimize the damage. It is a time-consuming project, with a total of 8 hours of driving if based in Puerto Escondido, but worth it, at least for independent birding travelers who are less pressed by time.

In the evening and the next morning, I enjoyed the comforts of Hotel El Quemaito. The next day, I had my car washed in Barahona and drove six hours to the Santo Domingo airport, getting lost five times on the way. I still do not know how the coastal highways run in Santo Domingo. The intersections lack (clear) signs and I apparently never found the correct way through. I did, however, get on my New Year night flights to New York, London, Helsinki and Oulu. It was a night of empty airports and reduced ticket prices, and smooth travel altogether. Well, all the way to Helsinki, where Finnair dropped my suitcase by the runway and delivered the smashed Samsonite Aire to me a day later, with all four tires lost (!), as if nothing had happened... Inside, a collection of Antillean estate rhums had by some miracle stayed intact, including a EUR 56 bottle from Guadeloupe with Brown Tremblers on it!





Fig. 23. KRAAHHH, Welcome to Los Haitises! Please, order some tasty fish (for me), now!!

