

Dominican Republic – October 2010

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I added another island to my “West Indies List” when the “International Bicknell’s Thrush Conservation Group” opted to hold its annual meeting in the Dominican Republic in November 2010. Figuring that if I was going to spend three days in a meeting down there, I’d damn well better make some time for birding (or should it be: “Let’s go birding in Hispaniola. And what a coincidence – there’s a professional meeting at the same time!”). And thus my colleague Len Reitsma and I headed down a few days earlier to see what we could find.

Almost all my information was gleaned from either eBird or other trip reports, and I’m grateful to have such resources available on the web! The only exception was for our last morning, where we got a more current tip from Kate Wallace of Tody Tours (who we also had the pleasure of meeting at the thrush meeting).

A note on logistics. Neither Len nor I is particularly good with Spanish, but we managed to survive pretty well between our toddler-level Espanol, hand gestures, and whatever English our conversing partners possessed. Probably the trickiest situations were with the military checkpoints right near the Haitian border (where in retrospect perhaps I should have tried dredging up my high school French!). We rented a 4WD Suzuki, but ended up not really needing 4WD since the road to Zapoten was impassible even for that (and our clearance left something to be desired).

In the account below, endemics or Caribbean specialties are written in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.

Day 1: October 28

Because of Len’s teaching schedule, we only had four full days to work with, and opted to spend most of it in or near the Sierra do Bahoruco in the southwest. After picking up our car we headed west and made it through Santo Domingo with minimal problems. Just east of the city of Azua, we decided to take a break and turned left onto an unmarked dirt road that ultimately led to a banana plantation. We spent about an hour birding here and found our first endemics: HISPANIOLAN LIZARD-CUCKOO, BLACK-CROWNED PALM-TANAGER, NARROW-BILLED TODY, and HISPANIOLAN WOODPECKER. We saw plenty more of all these, but given that darkness was closing in it was nice to see SOME birds on our first day in the country. That evening we spent the night at the Hotel Caribe in Barahona (as mentioned in many other reports). After settling in we went a little ways south to what I believe is called the “Santa Elena Road” (the sign might be gone now, but we were only there in the dark). Basically it’s a road off to the right just before a military checkpoint south of Barahona. We drove up a ways, stopping frequently to listen for owls or nightjars, and occasionally playing their calls, but didn’t hear anything. Len saw a nightjar flush from the road when I wasn’t paying attention, so we decided to return there before dawn the next morning.

Day 2: October 29

Back up the Santa Elena Road. Len again saw a nightjar that I missed, and just before dawn we heard something that MIGHT have been a Least Poorwill. But it was only a partial call and never did anything in response to playback, so we didn't count it. When it was light we did some birding on our way back down the road, but didn't see much of note. STOLID FLYCATCHERS were fairly common, as were Neotropical migrants, particularly Ovenbird and American Redstart.

From here we headed south on Route 44, getting our first HISPANIOLAN ORIOLE and PALMCHATS along the way (Palmchats ARE very cool birds, and we never did tire of them despite their abundance in most habitats – they were absent only in pine forest and desert). Our first “official” stop was Laguna Oviedo, where there is a nice visitor center with an observation deck. For an entrance fee of 200 pesos (about \$5.50) we could go up the tower and look around. The park ranger tried getting us to take a boat ride, but we were already running late for our rendezvous in the mountains, so we only scanned the lagoon with our binoculars. Highlight here was a distant flock of AMERICAN FLAMINGOS, plus the more expected herons.

The day's target was the pine forest on the south slope of the Sierra de Bahoruco, as accessed along the famous “Alcoa Road.” As others have described, this is a paved access road for old aluminum mines, and is in very good shape. It is reached from Route 44 by turning right after a bridge overpass – just past signs for “Bahia de los Aquilas” and near the 11 km marker. The road initially passes through level scrubland until you reach a park entrance booth (100 pesos/person), and then starts climbing. Just around where the pines started we came across a group of photographers with a local guide who were working on an ANTILLEAN PICULET. This turned out to be the only one of these we saw. Between here and La Charca, we stopped a couple of times, adding HISPANIOLAN SPINDALIS and HISPANIOLAN EMERALD.

Because of our lingering at places in the morning, we actually didn't get to La Charca (the waterhole) until around 11 a.m., and thus missed peak activity. In fact, it was pretty quiet overall, and I think the only new bird was HISPANIOLAN PEWEE. Lots of good dragonflies though. At this point we decided to try coming back later in the afternoon, and headed on up the road to see what else we might find. Other than Palm Warblers along the edges of the old bauxite mine, there wasn't much going on, so we went back down the hill to check the coast out near Cabo Rojo – reached by continuing under Route 44 on the Alcoa Road to the shipping port. We never found anything resembling a town (a second goal was to get a late lunch) and the birding was quiet here as well, so it was soon time to return up to La Charca for the later afternoon.

The return visit was well worth it. Between the piculet spot and La Charca, we found several more HISPANIOLAN SPINDALIS, two ANTILLEAN SISKINS, 1-2 GREATER ANTILLEAN ELAENIAS, a RUFOUS-THROATED SOLITAIRE, and an ANTILLEAN EUPHONIA. By the time we got to the water hole, things were quieting down, and the highlights were several White-collared Swifts overhead and a brief look at a HISPANIOLAN CROSSBILL (immature or female) that landed briefly in a pine while Len, unfortunately, was farther down the road. Also of note was a large movement of wintering warblers (mostly Cape Mays, but also Prairies and Black-and-whites), going to roost, along with a few residents like BLACK-CROWNED PALM-TANAGERS and PINE WARBLERS. There were easily 15-20 Cape Mays in this movement, and the pines were alive with birds for 15-20 minutes. After the roost flock had passed, we

decided to start heading out, since we still hadn't eaten since the morning and had a lot of driving to do. Maybe halfway down the road we were rewarded with a flock of 20-25 HISPANIOLAN PARROTS feeding in the pines along the road. Back out on the flats, we spotted a Burrowing Owl and a GREATER ANTILLEAN NIGHTJAR in the car's headlights.

Our destination for the evening was the town of Duverge, about an hour west of Barahona on Route 46. Based on a previous trip report, we were looking to stay at Hotel Ana. We found it OK, but the rooms they offered were on the iffy side (e.g., the water wasn't working in one of them), and we were quoted a price of 1000 pesos per night for the two of them (each was too small to house both of us). Having been spoiled by the excellent room for 1300 at Hotel Caribe the night before, we opted to look elsewhere in town. As luck would have it, we quickly found the Hotel la Casona: right on the main street and for only 800 pesos per night double occupancy. One minor problem became apparent as the evening progressed: at street level the Hotel la Casona has a bar – and a relatively large speaker – and it turns out to be a popular place for the locals to hang out and party. It didn't help much that the music being played was often not the greatest (mind you, I'm no connoiseur of Dominican music, but some of this just rubbed us the wrong way – especially with the base cranked up). I think we slept relatively well the first night since we were tired from a long day, but the next night I was awake until 3 a.m. when the festivities finally stopped. So a word of caution when attempting to stay in Durverge!

Day 3: October 30

We got up before dawn to take the supposedly bone jarring road up to Puerto Escondido on the north slope of the Sierra de Batoruco, flushing another GREATER ANTILLEAN NIGHTJAR maybe a third of the way up. The good news is that while this road is still incredibly dusty, it has recently been improved considerably (if previous reports are any indication) and was wide and well graded all the way up. We arrived at the Rabo de Gato trail around 7 a.m. and spent the next three hours there. To reach Rabo de Gato, go through Puerto Escondido and turn left at the T-intersection (Rabo de Gato is well signed throughout). You will need to bear right to cross a canal and bear right again after crossing a smaller stream at the edge of a field (on your left). After the second right you will come to a fenced in camping area – we continued past this and up a small hill before parking at a wide spot (the second morning we went farther and parked at the picnic table).

The reason we opted to start at Rabo de Gato rather than heading straight up to the areas near the Haitian border (e.g., Zapoten - accessed by turning right at the T), was because Kate Wallace had told me that the road to Zapoten had been washed out by storms in October and was probably still impassible. Rather than spending our morning being frustrated by a poor road, we decided to start with Rabo de Gato and do an afternoon recognizance of the other road. If it had been made passable, we'd head up to Zapoten the following morning.

Rabo de Gato contains a nice mix of semi-moist (for lack of a better word) forest and a riparian strip that is more lush. Birds were often difficult to see between the often thick understory and closed canopy, but we still had a good morning. Endemics included lots of HISPANIOLAN LIZARD-CUCKOOS, BROAD-BILLED and NARROW-BILLED TODIES, HISPANIOLAN WOODPECKERS, FLAT-BILLED VIREO (came in to playback after we initially detected it by

song), PALMCHATS, BLACK-CROWNED PALM-TANAGERS, and two more ANTILLEAN SISKINS (and a better look than the day before). Other birds of note were KEY WEST QUAIL DOVE (heard), OLIVE-THROATED PARAKEET (heard), ANTILLEAN PALM SWIFT, VERVAIN HUMMINGBIRD, STOLID FLYCATCHER, RUFOUS-THROATED SOLITAIRE (heard), RED-LEGGED THRUSH (heard), and ANTILLEAN EUPHONIA (a great look at this often tricky bird). In or along the ponded stream near where we parked were Least Grebe and wintering Louisiana Waterthrushes.

From here we began our exploration of the road to Zapoten, stopping first at “La Placa” to look for BAY-BREASTED CUCKOO. We didn’t think we had a good shot at noon, but figured it wouldn’t hurt to scope out the area for the next morning. So imagine our elation when 10-15 minutes down the trail we came across a genuine BAY-BREASTED CUCKOO out in the open in a small clearing. After our successful “kua” (a local name) foray we continued up the road to see how far we could get. The answer: about 3 km, or nowhere near Zapoten and access to the montane forest. The avian highlight between the cuckoo and our turning around was a small flock of Helmeted Guineafowl crossing the road (apparently the species has been in this part of the island since the 1600s!).

By now it was 1 p.m., and things were pretty quiet, so we headed back to Durverge for a little siesta, and then opted to circumnavigate Lago Enriqueillo. Lago Enriqueillo (named for a Taino resistance fighter during the Spanish conquest) is a large saline lake that sits at roughly 40 m below sea level (and thus has no outlet). It’s famous for flamingos and crocodiles, although again you need to take a boat trip to see them. Our target here was the mis-named (HISPANIOLAN) PALM CROW, which is apparently much easier to find in areas with cacti – go figure. Our intel suggested finding a dirt road that headed north off Route 46 west of Durverge – or from behind a disco called “La Zurza.” Somehow we missed the latter, but eventually just picked a random dirt track and followed it into the desert. And there we heard – and eventually saw – a very vocal and curious group of 7 PALM CROWS. But not much else. Farther west, and after navigating the several military checkpoints near the border town of Jimani, the road went along the extreme western end of the lake, and we pulled over a couple of times to look for water birds. Along the way, we also got some great looks at PLAIN PIGEON in roadside trees. Waterbirds included a nice mix of herons, shorebirds, and waterfowl, most of which are also regular in North America. The exceptions were several CARIBBEAN COOTS and eight WHITE-CHEEKED PINTAIL. We didn’t bird much on the north side of the lake, although just east of La Descubierta we got a very good look at two HISPANIOLAN ORIOLES. As the sun was starting to set, we were heading south at the east end of the lake, and came across an impressive area of wetlands formed by the delta of a river coming in from the east. Our best bird here was Clapper Rail, but I suspect other goodies (Spotted Rail?) lurk there for someone willing to explore it more thoroughly.

And then we were back in Durverge for the party...

Day 4: October 31

The morning (6:30 to noon) was again spent at Rabo de Gato, after seeing four Burrowing Owls on the drive up. This time we followed the trail (taking a left fork when presented) until it dead-ended in an old clearing with nice views of the surrounding forested hills. Species found were

similar to those the previous day, with the following exceptions: WHITE-FRONTED QUAIL-DOVE (in road not too far beyond the picnic table), HISPANIOLAN PARROT (heard only), and two WHITE-WINGED WARBLERS (aka Hispaniolan Highland-Tanagers) in a mixed migrant flock.

Heading back towards Santo Domingo, we decided to try finding an access point to Laguna Rincon, the large freshwater lake between Lago Enriquillo and Barahona. In the town of Cabral, turn north on the cut-off road to El Peñon (we lucked out on finding this, but it's probably easy enough to ask about), and watch for a small national park building on the left. After paying your 100 pesos, you can drive down a road that goes out on a dike that juts into the lagoon (the park personnel will point you in the right direction!). It eventually ends at a good view of the lagoon's extensive marshes, but views along the way are more difficult (you'll sometimes need to climb onto weedy dirt mounds). It was pretty windy when we were here, so there wasn't much on the water. The best bird was a Least Bittern in a marshy pond on the way out. There should have been Northern Jacanas in a couple of spots, but we certainly didn't see any.

By 5 p.m. we were back in Santo Domingo, and stopped outside the airport for a snack of papaya while waiting for another colleague's plane to come in. We picked Judith (Jude) up at the airport and headed north on a new Autopista (toll road) to the large town of Monte Plata. To get to the autopista from the airport, head west, be sure to get in the right lane, and in 4.5 km turn right after seeing signs for Samana (a resort area on the northeast coast). Once on the autopista, finding Monte Plata is easy – just watch for the sharp left turn at the sign off the main road.

We had hoped to stay at the Hotel El Toro, but upon arrival found it full. We were able to learn of an alternate place – the Hotel El Macho – but couldn't grasp the directions given by the man at El Toro. Not dissuaded, we went in the general direction he'd indicated, albeit without success, and found ourselves at a gas station where we asked again. This time, after some attempts at drawing maps, a guy from the gas station escorted us to El Macho in his car! There WAS a room at El Macho, and a fine one at that. It was basically a suite, having one bedroom with three beds, a nice bathroom, and a nice kitchen/living room with comfy furniture - all for only 650 pesos a night. El Macho strikes me as a most excellent place to base oneself in this part off the country. I neglected to get the phone number or address, but from El Toro, you simply cross the main street and continue a couple of blocks. It's not well signed, but I'm sure all the locals will be happy to help! And for the record, we stopped at El Toro for a most excellent lunch the next day.

Day 5: November 1

Our final pre-meeting day was spent in the karst forest along the road between Gonzalo and Los Limones, essentially along the western edge of Los Haitises National Park. To reach Gonzalo from points south, continue on the main road and watch for kilometer marker 110. Somewhere near here is a sharp backwards right turn (which may not be well marked) for Gonzalo. Once in the town center the road to Los Limones takes off to the left. You will pass a wetland (Least Grebe with young) and go through an agricultural area before turning left at a T. From here you gain elevation and soon enter moist forest where you can start to bird. The target here is the critically endangered RIDGWAY'S HAWK (perhaps fewer than 100 pairs in the world). A good

place to start looking is a school on the right approximately where you start entering an area with more houses. Our approach to birding the Los Limones road was to park and walk up the road a little ways. Len would then go back to the car while Jude and I continued, pass us, park farther up, and sometimes work backwards to us. In this manner we leapfrogged our way along almost to the village proper (unfortunately I can't recall any of our mileages).

In the process, we found several WHITE-NECKED CROWS and between us three looks at 2-3 RIDGWAY'S HAWKS. The best look at the latter was in a dip not too far beyond the school. Other birds of note were Sharp-shinned Hawk, Mangrove Cuckoo, ANTILLEAN MANGO, VERVAIN HUMMINGBIRD, and of course lots of PALMCHATS. It's worth noting that for some reason, this is the first time we saw Turkey Vultures for the entire trip, since they are only found on the northeast portion of the country. Why they haven't managed to colonize the coastal plain or southwest is beyond me, since I suspect there are still plenty of dead livestock in these other areas.

Another option for hawk-searching in Los Limones is a local guide named Timoteo Bueno (phone 829-758-4362), and other locals are also available. It's worth noting that as we drove through the village, several locals shouted out "Gavilan!" as we passed. This is the local name for the hawk, and it would appear that the locals realize that gringos in town with binoculars equate to birders. It would thus appear that they recognize the "value" of the hawk as a potential source of extra income, and it's encouraged that visiting birders try to reinforce this value by stopping to purchase food, drink, or whatever else might be on hand!

From here it was back to Santo Domingo, turning in our rental car, and taking a cab to the Hotel Santo Domingo. For the next three days we were in our meeting, with birding limited to early morning on the hotel grounds or at lunch around the University of Santo Domingo library where the meeting took place. Pickings in this urban setting were limited to the common residents and migrants, and the only adds to the trip list were Merlin and Blackpoll Warbler.

Our total for the trip was 108 species, not bad considering the facts that a) we only had 4 mornings, b) we couldn't get to Zapoten, c) we didn't try for shorebirds, and d) it was our first trip to the island. For aficionados of other taxa, Hispaniola is loaded with butterflies and lizards, and we saw (read: were able to identify) 36 and 8 species respectively. Plus 26 species of Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies). Anyone wanting more information on this trip or these other taxa is welcome to contact me at [biodiva\[at\]myfairpoint.net](mailto:biodiva@myfairpoint.net) (assuming I still have that email address when you read this report!).

Annotated Species List

Key to Sites: AR = Alcoa Road, LC = La Charca, RG = Rabo de Gato, LE = Lago Enriquillo, LR = Laguna Rincon, SD = Santo Domingo, LL = Los Limones road

Blue-winged Teal – common in most wetlands

Northern Shoveler – 3 at LE

White-cheeked Pintail – 8 at LE

Ruddy Duck – 3 at LR

Helmeted Guineafowl – 4 above La Placa

Least Grebe – scattered about (RG, LR, Gonzalo)

Pied-billed Grebe – LR and Gonzalo

American Flamingo – distant flock at Laguna Oviedo

Brown Pelican – surprisingly scarce: only at Cabo Rojo and SD, plus an out-of-place bird on freshwater at LR

Magnificent Frigatebird – only two for the whole trip: both along the coast road west of the airport

Least Bittern – one at LR

Great Egret – all over the place

Snowy Egret – less common than above, but still widespread

Little Blue Heron - ditto

Tricolored Heron – least common of the *Egretta* herons, and only in the southwest

Cattle Egret – all over the place

Green Heron – here and there

Yellow-crowned Night-Heron – one at east end of LE at dusk

White Ibis – three flew over the road just north of Laguna Oviedo

Turkey Vulture – common between Monte Plata and LL

Osprey – scattered about along southwest coast, plus one over AR at edge of pines!

Sharp-shinned Hawk – one along LL

Ridgway's Hawk – 2-3 along LL

Red-tailed Hawk – here and there

American Kestrel – quite common in most lowland areas, all along the main southern highway

Merlin – one at University of SD

Clapper Rail – heard at LE

Purple Gallinule – LR

Common Moorhen – found in all wetlands

Caribbean Coot – several at LE, a few at LR

Black-bellied Plover – LE

Killdeer – scattered about

Black-necked Stilt – found in most open wetlands

Spotted Sandpiper – only one: at LR

Greater Yellowlegs – scattered about

Solitary Sandpiper – scattered about

Lesser Yellowlegs – scattered about, but less common than Greater

Western Sandpiper – two at LR (we never really tried for shorebirds)

Laughing Gull – two at LR

Royal Tern – small numbers along southwest coast
Rock Pigeon – common in urban areas
Scaly-naped Pigeon – along AR
Plain Pigeon – RG, west end of LE
White-winged Dove – RG, seemed unusually scarce for a Caribbean Island
Zenaida Dove – AR and LE, I expected to see more of these as well
Mourning Dove – most common *Zenaida* dove, but still local to the southwest
Common Ground-Dove - everywhere
Key West Quail-Dove – heard both mornings at RG
White-fronted Quail Dove – great looks at a bird in the trail just beyond the picnic table at RG
Olive-throated Parakeet – heard at RG
Hispaniolan Parrot – small flock along AR, heard at RG
Mangrove Cuckoo – one along LL
Bay-breasted Cuckoo – one along trail at La Placa
Hispaniolan Lizard-Cuckoo – very common, heard in most places and frequently seen as well;
seems more common and/or easy to see than Puerto Rican Lizard-Cuckoo
Smooth-billed Ani - widespread
Burrowing Owl – along lower stretch of AR and road to Puerto Escondido
Hispaniolan Nightjar – as above, plus a probable along the Santa Elena Road south of Barahona
White-collared Swift – late afternoon at LC
Antillean Palm-Swift – common around RG and in SD
Antillean Mango – one east of Azua, several along LL and at Hotel SD
Hispaniolan Emerald – both sides of Sierra de Bahoruco, one on road to LL
Vervain Hummingbird – scattered about in low numbers, singing along LL
Broad-billed Tody – common at RG, several todies elsewhere weren't always identified
Narrow-billed Tody – scattered about
Belted Kingfisher – scattered about, including one at LC
Antillean Piculet – one along AR
Hispaniolan Woodpecker – everywhere there were trees
Greater Antillean Elaenia – AR
Hispaniolan Pewee – RG and AR
Stolid Flycatcher – RG and Santa Elena Road
Gray Kingbird – generally common and widespread, but absent at higher elevations along AR
Flat-billed Vireo – one at RG
Black-whiskered Vireo – one outside of Gonzalo
Palm Crow – several in desert west of Durverge
White-necked Crow – lots along LL
Rufous-throated Solitaire – one each AR and RG
Red-legged Thrush – RG
Northern Mockingbird – everywhere, sometimes to excess
Palmchat – everywhere except along AR, NOT to excess!
Northern Parula – scattered about
Yellow (Golden) Warbler – one near Cabo Rojo (we barely went to any mangroves)
Cape May Warbler – perhaps the most common migrant warbler
Black-throated Blue Warbler – fairly common in all forest areas
Yellow-throated Warbler – RG and Hotel SD

Pine Warbler – LC
Prairie Warbler – widespread
Palm Warbler – common along AR, but not seen elsewhere
Blackpoll Warbler – Hotel SD
Black-and-white Warbler – widespread but generally low numbers
American Redstart - widespread
Ovenbird – common along Santa Elena Road and at RG
Northern Waterthrush – several at west end of LE
Louisiana Waterthrush – several at RG
Common Yellowthroat – scattered about in wetlands or grassy areas
White-winged Warbler – pair with flock at RG
Bananaquit – scattered but far from common, most near LL or in SD
Black-crowned Palm-Tanager – all over the place
Hispaniolan Spindalis – AR
Yellow-faced Grassquit – more common than following species, but scattered
Black-faced Grassquit – only definite sighting was east of Azua, in stark contrast to the situation on other islands
Greater Antillean Bullfinch – AR and RG
Greater Antillean Grackle – LE and LR only. VERY different from other islands, where this species greets you at the airport
Hispaniolan Oriole – south of Barahona and east of La Descubierta
Antillean Euphonia – AR and RG
Hispaniolan Crossbill – one at LC
Antillean Siskin – AR and RG
House Sparrow – most urban areas
Nutmeg Mannikin – single flock in field near RG