

Birding Trip Report Haiti

May 24-28, 2010

By Olivier Langrand (langrand.olivier@gmail.com)

In the context of a professional trip to Haiti between May 24 and May 28, 2010 I managed to visit two of the main birding sites found in Haiti, recognized as Important Bird Areas (IBA) (www.birdlife.org/news/news/2008/11/caribbean_ibas.html) in the Caribbean by BirdLife International: Massif de la Hotte and Massif de la Selle. These two Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) rate exceptionally high globally from a conservation perspective as they protect many threatened endemic species of amphibians as well as some endemic mammals, reptiles and birds. Haiti is recognized as the country harboring the highest number of Alliance for Zero Extinction (AZE) (www.zeroextinction.org) species in the entire world.

May 23, 2010

I left Washington DC (IAD) at the end of the afternoon for Miami (MIA) on a United Airlines flight with my friend and colleague Claude Gascon. The flight left on time and arrived on time. We had booked a hotel room at the Hilton located at the airport as our flight for Port-au-Prince was leaving early the next morning. Another colleague, Robin Moore, joined us in Miami.



Port-au-Prince, Haiti, May 24, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

May 24, 2010

The free hotel shuttle drove us to the international terminal to catch the Air France flight between Miami and Pointe-à-Pitre (Guadeloupe, France) via Port-au-Prince (Haiti). We left on time and the service aboard was good. Just before 10:30 am we started our approach to Port-au-Prince and from above the impacts of the earthquake that had hit Haiti just four months earlier (January 12, 2010) and killed at least 316,000 people were very obvious. The dense city of Port-au-Prince is built along the coast but expands greatly on the slopes up to Piéton-Ville. Hundreds of houses were destroyed as well as many large governmental buildings and monuments such as the Presidential Palace, the Parliament, and the cathedral. The United Nations and other relief groups have helped set up temporary camps for people who have lost their homes and provided a lot of tents and plastic tarps. From above, the international assistance appeared as a carpet of thousands of blue squares appearing in between grey entirely or partially collapsed buildings. The impression of desolation was very strong.

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A house destroyed by the earthquake. Port-au-Prince, Haiti. May 24, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

We landed in Haiti just before 11:00 am and passengers were directed towards a pre-fabricated building on the side of the main terminal. The latter displayed very deep cracks in the walls and was not safe to use. We cleared immigration rapidly, recovered our luggage and went through customs in no time. Outside a huge crowd was waiting for friends, family members, consultants, foreign government officials, relief organization workers, and faith-based group members. No need to say that no tourist was part of this pretty heteroclitic group of travelers. We were supposed to be picked up by our friend and main contact in Haiti, Philippe Bayard, Director of the Société Audubon Haïti, but we did not see him in the dense crowd waiting outside the airport building. We called him and he informed us that he was on his way to the airport but stuck in traffic not too far from the airport. As we will discover a bit later, driving around Port-au-Prince can be very difficult. Going from the city center to the airport (13 km) can take any time between 20 minutes and 2 hours. After a short while, Philippe appeared and we all went for a lunch meeting at a restaurant located not too far from the airport.

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Citizens from European Union countries do not need a visa to enter Haiti. I carried cash since I was not sure if ATMs would be operational. I would advise to bring US Dollars wherever you come from since it is widely accepted. You can also change your US Dollars into the official currency called Gourde. The Gourde used to be indexed on the US Dollar at a rate of 5 Gourdes for one US Dollar and as a result people named the five Gourde note one Haitian Dollar. However the Haitian Gourde is not indexed on the US Dollar anymore, but people continue using the term Haitian Dollar which can be very confusing. So be aware of the possibility for a price to be quoted in US Dollars, Haitian Dollars, or Gourdes. To prevent mistake and misunderstanding I would then suggest to visitors to think in terms of Gourdes to figure the cost of things. You can pay air tickets and hotel bills with an international credit card.

We spent a couple of hours meeting with Philippe, Einar Madsen, and Jessie Haspil (all directors of Société Audubon Haïti). After an initial briefing on local situation, we embarked on a field trip to Massif de la Hotte to visit Macaya National Park. This was the first of two field trips during the week.



Let L-410 Turbo of Tortug'Air. Port-au-Prince. Haiti. May 24, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

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We took a charter plane (Tortug'Air - www.tortugair.com) from Port-au-Prince to Les Cayes, 40 minutes trip across the southwestern peninsula of island, a coastal town at the foothills of Massif de la Hotte. It was a very good flight in an old 19-seater Czech plane (Let L-410 Turbo), with a Russian pilot. We had the opportunity to measure the extreme level of degradation of the natural environment. It is estimated that only 1.8% of the country (27,250 km²) are still covered with forest. Les Cayes is a small locality famous for being the place where Jean-Jacques Audubon was born on April 26, 1785. Haiti was at that time called Saint-Domingue and was a French colony before becoming independent in 1804. When Jean-Jacques Audubon was three years old, he and his father left Saint-Domingue and returned to Nantes, France. In 1803, his father sent his son Jean-Jacques Audubon to the United States to avoid conscription in the Napoleonic wars. He then anglicized his name as John-James Audubon.

At les Cayes, two four-wheel drive vehicles were waiting for us. At the airport as I was waiting for the cars to be ready for departure, I looked in the mango trees and in the bougainvilleas surrounding the parking lot and managed to see a couple of **Antillean Palm Swifts**, a pair of **American Kestrels**, a couple of **Scaly-naped Pigeons**, an **Antillean Mango**, one **Hispaniolan Woodpecker**, one **Turkey Vulture**, a few **Mourning Doves**, a couple of **Common Ground-Doves**, and a few **Bananaquits**. We left Les Cayes and drove through intensive agriculture areas crossed by a few irrigation canals and streams where I saw a couple of **Green Herons**, one **Little Blue Heron** and many **Cattle Egrets** as well as a group of **Smooth-billed Anis**. We then took a secondary road in the direction of Ravine Sud located on the eastern side of Macaya National Park. The park covers 5,500 ha reaching its highest point at Pic Macaya at 2,347 m asl. The road up to the park was extremely bad and dangerous at times. On the way, we saw very few birds except for a very large breeding colony of **Village Weavers** (introduced as it is originally from Africa) established in a huge tree just on the outskirts of a village. It took us over 6 hours to travel some 30 km to the base camp in a small community located at 1,000 m asl near Caye Michel where we established a camp to spent the night. The villagers organized a great dinner for us with excellent vegetables, a mountain of rice and chicken and goat meat.



Female Antillean Mango (*Anthracothorax dominicus*),

Parc National de la Visite, Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo R. Mittermeier

Claude and Robin, who are internationally renowned amphibian specialists, engaged in a night expedition to the forest (or at least in search of forest) and mainly saw deforested fields and secondary forests. They made it into some pine forests that seemed to be connected to larger areas of intact forest further up the hills. They saw some frogs (mainly *Osteopilus* sp.), heard many *Eleutherodactylus* spp, and photographed many *Anolis* lizards.

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Parc National de Macaya, Haiti. May 25, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

May 25, 2010

The next morning, before the first light I embarked on a bird watching walk with two villagers as guides. For the first three hours after sunrise the weather was fine and we managed to reach some forest at an altitude of 1250 m asl called Morne Cavalier, identified as an Important Bird Area (IBA) under the name of Bois Musicien, which forms the south-western spur of the Macaya Biosphere Reserve. The broadleaf forest growing on a harsh karstic zone was slightly degraded, but heavily fragmented by subsistence agriculture. Evidence of charcoal production indicated that the clearing of the forest is also the result of fuel wood extraction. Cattle and goats were also roaming free in and around forest blocks. Despite the level of degradation, most of the endemic birds were observed. Among the most interesting species, I saw a few pairs of **Narrow-billed Todies***, a few **Golden Swallows***, a couple of **Hispaniolan Lizard-Cuckoos**, one **Mangrove Cuckoo**, a couple of the endemic **Grey-crowned Palm-tanagers*** and a pair of **Hispaniolan Trogons***. This place is also known for an endemic mammal, the Endangered

Hispaniola solenodon (*Solenodon paradoxus*)
www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/20321/0 .

This area is the most accessible part of Macaya National Park and thus the most impacted. It is also the most biologically studied. No sign of active management of the area was noted.



Narrow-billed Tody (*Todus angustirostris*). Parc National de la Visite, Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo R. A. Mittermeier

Land use in the mountains is mostly subsistence agricultural (extensive use) and deforestation for charcoal production. This results in constant encroachment on the standing forest and certainly on what is left of the park. Robin who had been to this same area two year before noticed significant changes (for the worse) in the amount of standing forest in the general area where we stayed. This does not bode well for the future of the park's integrity. Massif de la Hotte is the absolute top priority Alliance for Zero Extinction (AZE) site in the world with (officially, but perhaps more than) 13 threatened endemic frog species and one Endangered and six Vulnerable Hispaniola endemic bird species.

We drove back from Macaya National Park to Les Cayes. Driving back took less time than the way in. We stopped at the Fortress des Platons built in 1804 by Jean-

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Jacques Dessalines (Jacques I, Emperor of Haiti) that dominates at 600 m asl the coastal plane of Les Cayes. In the threes surrounding the fortress, I saw a pair of **Red-tailed Hawk**, and a couple of Black-crowned Palm-tanagers. At the airport we took the charter flight back to Port-au-Prince and checked in at the Hotel Villa Creole.

May 26, 2010

Later that morning Russ Mittermeier arrived in Port-au-Prince and joined us as we were meeting with a consulting firm involved in the environment sector. The meeting took place outside and we saw two Hispaniola Lizard-cuckoos and many Bananaquits.



Auberge de la Visite. Massif de la Selle. Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

In the afternoon, we left for the Massif de la Selle to visit the Parc de la Visite through the cities of Jacmel and Marigot. Massif de la Selle, located south-west of the capital city, is very close to the capital city yet the roads in and out are long and although not quite as bad as Macaya, are by any measure very challenging and

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rough. We arrived in Seguin at a nice lodge called Auberge de la Visite owned by a member of Société Audubon Haïti. We occupied the three rooms (each with its own spacious bathroom) of the Auberge and enjoyed a great diner in the large outdoor porch.



Antillean Siskin (*Carduelis dominicensis*). Parc National de la Visite. Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo R. A. Mittermeier

May 27, 2010

The next morning we left the lodge located at 1,700 m asl at dawn to visit the surrounding landscape and find some forest remnants. We traveled 6 km from the lodge and eventually settled on a hillside at 1,800 m asl where we could see some forested valleys below us. We walked 1 km until we reached one such wet montane broadleaf forest fragment. Despite the presence of some very interesting and representative forest birds species among which a few Golden Swallows, two **Greater Caribbean Elaenia**, several **Hispaniola Parakeets**, one **Rufous-throated Solitaire*** (many more heard), a few pairs of **Hispaniolan Stripe-Headed Tanagers**, a few **Black-crowed Palm-Tanagers**, a couple of Grey-

crowned Palm Tanager, a few **Antillean Siskins*** and a pair of Hispaniola Trogons the state of the forest was depressing as it has undergone severe pressure and could be at best described as severely impacted forest remnant. The most notable observation is a **Western Chat Tanager***, a Critically Endangered species and one of the endemic birds that depends on the thick broadleaf forest - the same as for Black-capped Petrel. This species is a bit of a skulker, meaning it prefers to stay in the cover of thick shrubs and as a result can be challenging to view. The state of the forest was depressing as it has undergone severe pressure and could be at best described as severely impacted forest remnant. No sign of two endangered bird species known from this place, the La Selle Thrush (*Turdus swalesi*) and the Hispaniola Crossbill (*Loxia megalaga*) was noted. Land use all around is extensive subsistence and commercial farming with trees being cut for charcoal, agriculture extension and other uses in and around the forest patch. The presence of cattle and goats was noted in and around the forest fragments. It is hard to imagine that this type of forest remnant can survive more than a few more years under this type of continued scenario. On our way back to the lodge, we decided to walk along the road and were impressed by the number of people that transit the area, mostly on foot or on motorbike taxis! This is a true "people highway" in what is supposed to be a national park. We found some pine forests (probably managed old plantations) that were nice in that they at least represented some forested potential for this area of the country. Pine forests (*Pinus occidentalis*) occur naturally around this Massif. However, recent tree stumps were seen leading us to believe that even the pine forest is being impacted for domestic use. In the pine forest, I saw a pair of **Northern Bobwhites** and a pair of Hispaniolan Trogons. In general the small remnants of montane broadleaf forest found on the southern slope are in under extreme pressure and are almost gone except on the extreme scarp face where agriculture is impossible. Some large fragments of pine forests are still present but need to be managed to prevent further degradations. At 1,800 m asl I saw one pair of **Killdeers** and a small group of **Hispaniola Palm Crows**.



Pair of Northern Bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*). Parc National de la Visite. Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo R. A. Mittermeier

Around the Auberge de la Visite, I saw a group of 20 **Yellow-faced Grassquits*** together with a few **Greater Antillean Bullfinchs**.



Parc National de la Visite. Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

The northern boundary of Parc National de la Visite, located north-east of Seguin, is one of the few known breeding sites of the Endangered Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hasitata*). The destruction of the forest of Haiti may lead this species to extinction.

We traveled back to Port-au-Prince on the afternoon and checked in at Hotel Villa Creole (www.villacreole.com) located in Pétion-Ville up-hill of Port-au-Prince. My room looked west with a few very large trees in sight including two very large palm trees. One of the palm trees harbored a large colony of dozens of **Palmchats**. The place was also visited once by two **White-necked Crows***. In the garden of the hotel I saw one **Black-cowled Oriole**, and a couple of Hispaniolan Woodpeckers.

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Western Chat Tanager. Parc National de la Visite. Haiti. May 27, 2010. Photo R. A. Mittermeier

May 28, 2010

On the Friday morning, I looked for birds in the premises of the hotel. The hotel is surrounded by many large trees and has a roof terrace that goes all around the hotel. I saw one Antillean Mango, a pair of Hispaniolan Woodpeckers, several **Gray Kingbirds**, and many Bananaquits.

The earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, 2010. Port-au-Prince, as well as the towns of Léogâne, Jacmel and Petit-Goâve, was seriously affected. More than 316,000 died and as many were injured. About 1.3 million people are living in temporary shelters in Port-au-Prince and over 600,000 people have left the areas affected to seek shelter elsewhere in the country, exacerbating the already acute environmental degradations. The damage and losses are estimated to be nearly \$8 Billion USD. An Action Plan for National Recovery and Development has been prepared and is currently implemented by the Government of Haiti with the support of the international community. The earthquake has had a very severe impact on human and institutional capacities both in the public and the private sectors as well

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as non-governmental organizations. The government and the international community are focusing on the immediate needs which make sense considering the humanitarian crisis created by the earthquake. However it is critically important that very rapidly the mid-term and long-term visions are again taken into consideration. In this context the key actions of environmental restoration will need to be taken to preserve an important asset of the future economic development of Haiti. Right now the environment is totally absent of the preoccupations of the decision makers and the impacts on the little of what was left of natural ecosystems in Haiti, including protected areas, are already very visible. The tipping point is close to being reached. Action is needed urgently if Haiti wants to conserve some of its biodiversity and wants to continue benefiting from the services rendered by its natural ecosystems.



Hôtel Villa Créole. Pétion-Ville. Haiti. May 28, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

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Palm trees viewed from Hôtel Villa Créole. Pétiön-Ville, Haiti. May 28, 2010. Photo O. Langrand

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Maps of Haiti were bought in the US prior to the trip. I did not see any maps available in shops in Port-au-Prince.

Haïti 1 : 350,000. International Travel Maps. www.itmb.com

Haiti and Dominican Republic 1: 600,000. Nelles Map. www.nelles-verlag.de

List of the bird species observed (*lifers): Names and taxonomic order follow Raffaele H., Wiley, J., Garrido, O., Keith, A. & Raffaele, J. 1998.

1. Little Blue Heron (*Egretta caerulea*)
2. Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*)
3. Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*)
4. Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*)
5. Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*)
6. American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*)
7. Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*)
8. Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*)
9. *White-necked Crow (*Corvus leucognaphalus*)
10. *Hispaniolan Palm Crow (*Corvus palmarum*)
11. Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*)
12. Rock Dove (*Columba livia*)
13. Scaly-napped Pigeon (*Columba squamosa*)
14. Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)
15. Common Ground Dove (*Columbina passerina*)
16. *Hispaniolan Parakeet (*Aratinga chloroptera*)
17. Hispaniolan Lizard-cuckoo (*Saurothera longirostris*)
18. Mangrove Cuckoo (*Coccyzus minor*)
19. Smooth-billed Ani (*Crotophaga ani*)
20. Palmchat (*Dulius dominicus*)
21. White-collared Swift (*Streptoprogne zonaris*)
22. Black Swift (*Cypseloides niger*)
23. Antillean Palm Swift (*Tachornis phoenilobia*)
24. Antillean Mango (*Anthracothonax dominicus*)

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25. Hispaniolan Emerald (*Calorosilbon swainsoni*)
26. Hispaniolan Woodpecker (*Melanerpes striatus*)
27. *Narrow-billed Tody (*Todus angustirostrus*)
28. *Hispaniolan Trogon (*Priotelus roseigaster*)
29. Gray Kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*)
30. *Greater Antillean Elaenia (*Elaenia fallax*)
31. *Golden Swallow (*Tachycineta euchrysoa*)
32. Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglotos*)
33. *Rufous-throated Solitaire (*Myadestes genibarbis*)
34. Red-legged Thrush (*Turdus plumbeous*)
35. Bananaquit (*Coereses flaveola*)
36. *Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanager (*Spindalis dominicensis*)
37. *Grey-crowned Palm Tanager (*Phaenicophilus poliocephalus*)
38. Black-crowned Palm Tanager (*Phaenicophilus palmarum*)
39. *Western Chat Tanager (*Calyptophilus tertius*)
40. Black-cowled Oriole (*Icterus dominicensis*)
41. Greater Antillean Grackle (*Quiscalus niger*)
42. *Yellow-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris olivacea*)
43. Black-faced Grassquit (*Tiaris bicolor*)
44. *Antillean Siskin (*Carduelis dominicensis*)
45. House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)
46. Village Weaver (*Ploceus cucullatus*)
47. Greater Antillean Bullfinch (*Longixilla violacea*)