

IN SEARCH *of* HAITI'S BIRDS

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*The daunting plight of birds
in the Western Hemisphere's most
environmentally ravaged nation*

“Ah, my poor little birds! My poor country!” says Haitian conservationist Phillipe Bayard. I am standing with him in the sprawling city of Les Cayes, ironically the birthplace of John James Audubon. We turn away from the garbage-filled streets and look up toward the layered, cloud-soaked peaks of the Massif de la Hotte, and together we imagine some lasting, protective spell cast over these mountains by Audubon's natal print. Here, in the southwestern tip of the most environmentally degraded nation in the Western Hemisphere, we look up at the Macaya Biosphere Reserve—the largest block of forest left in Haiti and one of the last refuges for its resident and migratory birds.

As we prepare to make the bone-jarring ascent up the one and only road into the Reserve, Bayard continues with his thoughts. “In a country like this,” he



Deforestation continues unchecked within and around the poorly defined borders of the Macaya Biosphere Reserve (above). The Reserve is a refuge for the Gray-crowned Palm-Tanager (right), a bird found nowhere else in the world.



Chris Rimmer (above) of the Vermont Institute of Natural Science has spearheaded efforts to conserve Haiti's remnant forests. The endemic Hispaniolan Trogon (right) clings to a precarious existence within these quickly disappearing patches.

says, "if you have the means, you must do something. I have chosen to save the birds."

In 2004, Bayard formed the first Haitian nongovernmental organization to focus on avian conservation—the Société Audubon Haiti (SAH). Soon after, he entered into a research partnership with the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) and the Sociedad Ornitológica de la Hispaniola (SOH), based in neighboring Dominican Republic. Together, these institutions have embarked on three research expeditions in as many years to find out what remains to be saved of Haiti's avifauna.

Led by Chris Rimmer, head of the Conservation Biology Department at VINS, these expeditions have shown that although many of Haiti's at least 250 species of birds—30 of which are

endemic to the island of Hispaniola—persist, they do so in small pockets and often in low numbers. Only 1.5 percent of Haiti's original forest habitat remains, but day by day even that tiny remnant is being steadily slashed and burned by subsistence farmers, who make up the majority of Haiti's population.

Only two substantially forested national parks exist in Haiti—the Macaya Biosphere Reserve and La Visite National Park. Rimmer and Bayard are focusing their efforts within their poorly defined boundaries, where many of Haiti's most endangered birds are making their last stands.

"It's amazing what can pass for a road here!" We kept shouting comments like this to each other at intervals over the revving of the engine

and the gunshot cracking of loose rocks on the chassis. Undaunted, those who volunteered to be drivers for the journey from Les Cayes up into the highlands of the Macaya Biosphere Reserve—one each from SAH and SOH—did so like true islanders. Our vehicles lurched and careened over jagged projections of limestone and eroded caverns with equal disregard for the rubber and steel of the trucks and the bones being jarred within.

In February 2004 and again in February 2006, Rimmer and Bayard put together expeditions that passed along this mountain road and up into the 5,500-hectare Macaya Biosphere Reserve. The Reserve, isolated for millennia at the very tip of Haiti's southwestern peninsula, has long been a repository of biodiversity. Its rugged geography of sharply uplifted coral and deeply recessed valleys has served as a natural avenue for speciation and a natural obstacle to all-out human development. To this day, many of its species of vascular plants, insects, reptiles, and amphibians have yet to be described.

In recent years, however, the surrounding human population has grown significantly, keeping pace with Haiti's overall projections of a doubling every 30 to 40 years. As a member of the 2004 expedition—the first comprehensive avian surveys in this area in 20 years—I witnessed the great anticipation of the burgeoning local population. Many of the "guards" on the park payroll had not been paid, much less visited, in more than a year and they were undoubtedly happy to see us. Women set up makeshift kitchens by the roadside and beside the lone park building to feed the throngs of men who gathered for a chance to be porters and guides. Children clad in scraps of clothing scampered everywhere, the bravest of them flashing broad smiles and yelling wild greetings.

Upon arriving, we shook off the dust, stretched out the aches of our journey up, and set to work immediately. We established a line of 25 mist nets through the area known as Rak Bwa, a karst-lined mosaic of active agriculture, second-growth forest, and thick stands of primary forest, lush with vines and orchids. Our nets filled quickly, and we were amazed by the unexpected abundance of the

birdlife. We captured and observed endemic White-winged Warblers—one of Hispaniola's least known and most endangered birds—in groups of three to eight individuals. Tiny, jewel-like Narrow-billed Todies, with their Caribbean mix of emerald green and scarlet red feathers, sallied for insects around every bend. Golden Swallows, a sharply declining species, passed overhead in groups of 2 to 12, and we saw one pair investigating a nesting cavity. Gray-crowned Palm-Tanagers, the only bird endemic to Haiti alone, paraded gregariously around our banding station. The surreal song of the Rufus-throated Solitaire surrounded us in the evening mist, the notes seeming to rise all around.

The avian abundance in Rak Bwa's karst broadleaf forest came as a surprise, given the poorly defined park boundaries and the constant proximity of active agriculture. Wandering cows shredded 10 of our mist nets, and we discovered several freshly slashed and burned patches well within the park boundaries. All day we could hear the sound of the field workers' songs in the not-so-distant vegetable patches, like a low



din beneath the songs of birds. Rak Bwa is one of Macaya's most important bird areas but it is also clearly one of its most threatened.

After several days of recording the avian abundance of Rak Bwa, we moved higher into the less-disturbed area known as Plaine Boeuf. Porters and guides packed our gear on their heads, preferring balance and a straight posture to the ache of nylon straps. A steep ascent led to a forest of towering Hispaniolan pines interspersed with islands of dense montane cloud forest, dominated by thickets of aptly named razor vines. Here, our overall captures were lower than in Rak Bwa, but several important species were abundant. We heard endangered Hispaniolan Crossbills flying high in the stands of pines and found Western Chat-Tanagers—another poorly known, critically endangered endemic—skulking along the wet cloud-forest floor.

In the early mornings and late evenings we paid particular attention to the reclusive Bicknell's Thrush, a migratory species that winters exclusively in the Greater Antilles but whose status in Haiti was unknown. Many of them answered our playback tapes with aggressive territorial responses, and we managed to coax 12 of these shy, spot-breasted thrushes into mist nets so that we could measure them and sample their genetic material—sure confirmation that this threatened migrant can still find suitable habitat in Haiti.

Other migrants sheltering for the winter in Macaya included Black-throated Blue Warblers, Ovenbirds, Cape May Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Yellow-throated Warblers, Black-and-white Warblers, American Redstarts, Common Yellowthroats, Worm-eating Warblers and, in a first for Haiti, Swainson's Warblers. Together,

Haiti's subsistence farmers continue to slash and burn the little that is left of the nation's forests (right). Porters and guides tell stories by firelight in Plaine Boeuf (below).



they underscore the critical importance of Macaya's forests.

With all these data in hand, we left Macaya in 2004 with a refreshed sense that much still remained to be preserved in this part of Haiti. And we left not a day too soon: within the week, Jean Bertrand Aristide's government had fallen, all Peace Corp volunteers had been evacuated, and United States Marines were on their way to Haiti.

Rimmer and Bayard returned to Macaya in 2006 and were surprised to find conditions largely unchanged. Park enforcement was no better, but agricultural intrusion was no worse. Additionally, the team went searching for Black-capped Petrels. This globally threatened pelagic bird is now known to nest only on the exposed limestone cliffs of Hispaniola and Cuba. After making some treacherous nighttime hikes along

cliffsides in the rain, they were rewarded by seeing at least four of these rare birds—confirmation that this species hangs on in Haiti. Rimmer was also surprised in 2006 to observe a group of Hispaniolan Parrots, a species that they had not found in 2004 and that is under severe pressure from the domestic caged-bird trade.

In 2005, Rimmer and Bayard organized an expedition to the much more degraded 3,000-



The lush cloud-forest habitat at the core of Macaya Biosphere Reserve (right) provides a final refuge for endemic species such as the Broad-billed Tody (above), always intent on catching passing insects.

hectare La Visite National Park, in the eastern Masif de La Selle, along the border with the Dominican Republic. The highlights included a list of migratory species similar to that of Macaya and several sightings of the La Selle Thrush, a rare endemic. Rimmer's team also confirmed the presence of at least two Black-capped Petrels within La Visite, and they spoke with a guide who talked of capturing dozens of them in a single night, using bonfires to trick the night-flying birds into flying into nets—a practice apparently abandoned in recent years due to their dwindling numbers. Unfortunately, the team did not find any White-winged Warblers, Hispaniolan Parrots, or Hispaniolan Parakeets, all species formerly found in the area and easily detected further east in the better-protected

parks of the Dominican Republic. They also captured only adult Green-tailed Warblers and Black-crowned Palm-Tanagers, suggesting that the recruitment of juveniles into the population at La Visite may be insufficient to offset the mortality of adults—a situation that can lead to a precipitous population crash.

Overall, the picture in La Visite is not a bright one. Rimmer reports that a “crisis situation exists, one that can only be resolved through implementation of immediate and stringent measures to prevent further loss of broadleaf forests, and carefully controlled reforestation efforts.” He saw no evidence of conservation enforcement within the park, and instead witnessed unregulated harvesting of trees. Without a concerted international effort to enforce the

conservation plans that have been written for La Visite, he says, “there can be little doubt that resident and migrant bird populations dependent on broadleaf forests will become extirpated from the park within three to five years.”

Clearly, Haiti's environmental plight is daunting, and it frequently takes a back seat to the country's many other problems. Often, Bayard is confronted with this question: Why worry about birds in a place where so many people are suffering? His answer is simple: the people, like the birds, cannot be separated from the land. If the land is suffering and being abused, so too are the people and the birds. When the resident birds of Haiti are gone, when migrants must all pass over Haiti and squeeze themselves into the remaining habitat in the Dominican Republic, it will be too late, Bayard believes, to salvage the Haitian forest, and a great basic necessity will be lost to Haitian society. The land will be so sun-scorched, so eroded and treeless, that there will be no hope of a good harvest, and the people will be unable to feed themselves.

Bayard believes that conservation is integral to building a better Haitian society. His model of one local NGO partnering with several international NGOs has created some progress toward raising conservation awareness—both in Haiti and abroad. It is Bayard's hope that more researchers will renew interest in Haiti—in its unique flora, its herpetofauna, and its birds. Macaya and La Visite are biodiversity hotspots and Bayard's “little birds” are members of an endemic bird community of global importance. For the future of Haiti, and of global biodiversity, they cannot be allowed to slip

away. “We cannot imagine,” Bayard says, “that Mr. Audubon, were he alive today, would have stood by, watching the birds disappear from the country where he was born.”

Jason Townsend is a Ph.D. student at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry and is currently studying the winter ecology of the Bicknell's Thrush in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In 2004, he was a member of the first team of ornithologists to enter Haiti in 20 years—an expedition led by Chris Rimmer of the Vermont Institute of Natural Science.

