



Searching for Hope: Bird Surveys in Parc National La Visite, Haiti

25 January - 2 February, 2005

By all accounts, Haiti's Parc National La Visite is in dire straits. Ornithological explorations of the park in the early 1960s and 1980s reported widespread deforestation and ecological degradation. Despite its formal protection and ruggedly mountainous landscape, La Visite is located only 25 km south of the sprawling and overpopulated Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince. Its 3000 hectares of pine forest, savanna, and montane cloud forest have fallen prey to logging and subsistence agriculture by a burgeoning human population. Yet, no systematic biological surveys of this critically endangered park have been conducted for over 20 years. Following VINS' successful field expedition to Haiti's Macaya Biosphere Reserve in February of 2004, Parc National La Visite was a logical next stop for a careful assessment of its birdlife and conservation status. Haiti's political waters had calmed somewhat, and VINS now has an established network of local cooperators, led by Philippe Bayard and Florence Sergile. We arranged a 9-day, multinational field trip, with the collective hope that our findings will catalyze action to conserve the park's remaining natural habitats.

Three 4WD vehicles caravanned from Port-au-Prince early in the afternoon of 25 January, laboring through the heavy traffic that crawled out of the city. After a long, circuitous, and occasionally stomach-churning drive that led us to Jacmel and then up to Seguin, our team arrived at Auberge La Visite at dusk. We were a multilingual mix of Haitians, Dominicans, and Americans (me). Conversations were lively and coursed from English, to Spanish, to Creole, to French. Everyone managed to be understood. The Auberge is a remarkable facility, an oasis of quiet comfort at 1790 m elevation (5875 ft), a very simply constructed stucco and tiled guest house, no frills, and an excellent site from which to base field work in La Visite. It is a tranquil spot, well-shaded by large native and planted trees, owned and operated by Winnie Athi (a real character with an expansive world view and a deep commitment to conservation of La Visite, who speaks fluent English). Other than Winnie, its two most notable features are hot water (an indescribable luxury) and excellent local food. Many migrant and resident birds set up shop in the Auberge's plentiful fruiting and flowering shrubs, and a large shade tree supports a bulky nest of communally-breeding Palm Chats, possibly the highest elevation nest of this endemic species on Hispaniola.

As pleasant as an extended stay at the Auberge might have been, we had to work to do and packed up early the next morning. A 3-4 km hike through pine forests (some of which were surprisingly intact), savannas, and combined pasture-cropland led us to a montane broadleaf fragment called Bérak. At 1575-1625 m elevation, Bérak is apparently the largest remaining tract of that habitat type in the park. This is a very wet forest, full of tree ferns and epiphytes, in a ravine that is almost constantly filled with clouds streaming from below (south). I

estimate its current extent at no more than 10-12 hectares. It is badly fragmented and disappearing rapidly, and will be essentially gone in 2-3 years. Birds, including Bicknell's Thrush, are packed into its dwindling habitat, much of which is now second growth. From 26-29 Jan, we ran 21 mist nets and banded 104 individuals, with the expected assemblage of montane forest endemics, including 1 La Selle's Thrush, 6 Western Chat-Tanagers, and 21 Green-tailed Ground Warblers. Banded migrants included Bicknell's Thrush (6; we found 8 birds, but two eluded our nets), Ovenbird (10), Black-throated Blue Warbler (11), American Redstart (2), and Worm-eating Warbler (1). Significantly, every Ground Warbler we captured was an ASY (> 2-year old) bird, suggesting that production or survival of young may be very low in this fragment. Highlights among our observations in Bérak were 4 Hispaniolan Parakeets, 2 Loggerhead Kingbirds, and at least 20 Golden Swallows. The current abundance of isolated large dead and dying trees may actually be favoring this latter species, which has been extirpated on Jamaica and is considered seriously threatened on Hispaniola. We found only a single pair of Hispaniolan Trogons and heard the songs of only 4 Rufous-throated Solitaires, both signature species of Hispaniolan montane broadleaf forests. There is active subsistence agriculture invading at every corner of Bérak, even into the heart of this remnant tract. The situation is grim, at best.

With mud-caked clothes and heavy hearts, we packed up our gear and hiked upslope to our next study site on the south slope of Pic La Visite, where we set up base camp in the pines at 1965 m. There we worked two adjacent but isolated small patches (ca. 2 ha each) of a drier, less well-developed broadleaf forest, embedded in the pines at 2000-2050 m elevation. We operated 20 nets from the evening of 30 Jan through midday of 1 Feb. Capture rates and diversity were lower here. We banded 63 individuals, with Greater Antillean Bullfinch (20) dominating. Two La Selle's Thrushes, 6 Black-crowned Palm-Tanagers, and 8 Ground Warblers (again all ASY birds) were highlights among endemics. We observed 8 Western Chat-Tanagers in the patches but didn't catch any. Banded migrants included 1 Bicknell's Thrush (each patch had a single bird, but we were able to catch only one), 4 Ovenbirds, 2 Black-throated Blue Warblers, and 1 Swainson's Warbler (first confirmation for La Visite). Observations of 2 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers (a first for me on Hispaniola) and up to 22 Hispaniolan Crossbills in the pine forest were noteworthy. Both patches were visibly impacted by cutting and clearing, but less dramatically than at Bérak, as they do not support any large trees and appear to have little arable soil underneath. One gruesome episode, highlighting the tenuous conservation status that birds of these isolated forest fragments face, was our discovery of 4 freshly-killed birds (3 bullfinches and a Black-faced Grassquit) in the same net on our final morning of banding. The culprit could only have been a mongoose or feral cat, both of which are introduced and reportedly widespread in La Visite. These two species undoubtedly take advantage of the abundant edge habitat created by extensive forest fragmentation throughout the park.

Because our mission included investigating the status of endangered Black-capped Petrels, a nocturnally-active cliff-nesting seabird that breeds only on Hispaniola, we hiked up to the summit of Pic La Viste on the afternoon of 30 Jan to get the lay of the land. My GPS gave me an altitude of 2190 m (7185 ft), and we had fine looks at the dramatic cliffs on the north slope of the long escarpment that stretches east to Morne Cabaio. We also noted some cliffs around the peak to the south. We were extremely disturbed to find the ridgeline mostly planted in

corn and parsely, with few pines remaining. The cliffs themselves do not appear to have been directly or heavily impacted, but the clearing from below approaches closely to their bases. The vista from Pic La Visite is spectacular, but the landscape is deforested as far as the eye can see. Having gotten our bearings, we descended back to our broadleaf patches and ran nets until dark. After dinner, with a local guide named Jean-Claude Exantus, four of us (me, 2 Dominican assistants, and a U.S missionary-birder named J.R. Crouse) struck out at 7:45 pm from our base camp, arriving at the Pic La Visite summit at 8:20. En route, just above the cliffs between our camp and the peak, two of us heard what we felt certain were the low, wailing calls of Black-capped Petrels, below and seemingly distant, difficult to precisely locate through the trees. A moment later, we all heard the 'whoosh' of a largish bird flying by rapidly overhead and towards the escarpment. Jean-Claude tried to tell us it was a barn owl, but we all doubted his ID. It had to have been a petrel.

On the summit, winds were blowing 8-12 mph from the NE, skies completely clear. Not, from what I gather, optimal conditions for petrel flights. However, we could all clearly hear a minimum of 2, and probably 3, birds moaning. One or two seemed to be flying in large, slow circles, while a third seemed more stationary to the west. None seemed especially close, but the wind and low volume of the calls again made birds difficult to locate. From the summit, we spent the next hour walking single file, headlamps guiding us through an array of corn patches, scrubby second growth and pines, east towards Morne Cabaio. We stopped at 4 different locations to listen. At the first two we heard birds to the west that we decided were most likely the same individuals heard from La Visite. At our final stop at 9:40 pm, atop cliffs that Jean-Claude reported to be the largest between La Visite and Cabaio, we could still hear petrels faintly back to the west, but another single bird clearly called once below us. This had to have been a different individual. We waited 10 minutes at this spot without hearing further petrel vocalizations, before heading back along the ridge and down through the pines, reaching camp after 10:30. We'd have liked to hike further, all the way to Morne Cabaio, but having ascended the peak twice already that day and needing to get up at 0515 to open nets, combined with Jean-Claude's report that we were still a good hour away, we had run out of gas.

I'm confident that we heard 4-5 petrels that night, possibly 6-7. Jean-Claude told us that locals used to catch 20-30 birds per night in the "Sen Sel" fires (possibly an exaggeration), but that the practice has been abandoned because the birds are essentially gone. We had thought seriously of trying to set a fire ourselves and setting a mist net array around it, but with the clear skies, wind, and low density of petrels, we decided not to. It would have been exciting to get photodocumentation of the species. For certain, we did not hear anything like the numbers of birds reported by David Wingate in the early 1960s or Charles Woods and coworkers in 1982. There can be little question that this species is in serious decline.

We returned to Auberge La Visite for a hot (yes, hot!) shower and superb meal of grilled lamb and homemade polenta on the evening of 1 February, then departed for Port-au-Prince the following morning. Though we were exhausted physically, we had not suffered nutritionally. Even while camping, we had our evening meals, and occasionally lunch, brought to us by local guides, fresh cooked by Winnie! There is an excellent cadre of experienced and reliable guides in the La Visite area, and we were fortunate to have had their help and camaraderie.

In short, the trip proved a real success on one hand, but a sobering vision of a disintegrating ecological future on the other. The rapidly-disappearing montane broadleaf forests of La Visite are in immediate and serious danger. If on-the-ground actions are not implemented within the next 1-2 years, or sooner, it will be too late. I'm convinced that concerted international pressure must be brought to bear on the Haitian Ministries of Environment and Agriculture, and that outside resources (i.e. funding and planning expertise) will be required. The internal will power exists in the persons of committed Haitian conservationists like Philippe Bayard, Florence Sergile, and Winnie Athi, but they are lonely voices now. A near-heroic effort will be required to salvage the remnant montane broadleaf and pine forests of La Visite, but I'm certain the effort is warranted. Once those forests are gone, their seed beds and wildlife will have vanished. There are no other local refugia to harbor them. The situation is bleak, but not beyond hope. However, time is definitely running out.

Chris Rimmer
Vermont Institute of Natural Science
Woodstock, VT 05091
crimmer@vinsweb.org

16 February 2005

Images from Parc National La Visite, February 2005



Forest Fragment at Béрак



View North from Pic La Visite



Banding Team at Béрак



**Recently
Fragmented
Forest at
Béрак**



Black-capped Petrel Nesting Cliffs, Pic La Visite



Winnie Athi (center) and friends