

An update on status of birds from Isla Cozumel, Mexico

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Este artículo se basa en 20 días de trabajo de campo (entre octubre y enero, 1993–2003) en la Isla Cozumel, Quintana Roo, México. Se discute el estatus de 29 especies, incluyendo varias que no habían sido reportadas previamente en la isla. Cuatro taxa endémicos han sufrido reducciones marcadas en sus poblaciones desde comienzos de los 1990s: *Buteo magnirostris gracilis*, *Centurus p. pygmaeus*, *Centurus aurifrons leei* y *Piranga roseogularis cozumelae*. Se discuten las posibles razones de estos declinios. La lista de aves de Cozumel ahora suma 224 especies.

The island of Cozumel lies only c.20 km off the north-east coast of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula but has a distinctive avifauna, including several endemic species and subspecies plus a number of Caribbean birds rare on the Mexican mainland. Howell & Webb⁸ listed 203 species recorded from Cozumel and noted another 35 species of hypothetical occurrence, mainly those known from specimens with doubtful locality data. Subsequent observations have confirmed the occurrence of four hypotheticals—Ruby-throated Hummingbird *Archilochus colubris*, Louisiana Waterthrush *Seiurus motacilla*, Dickcissel *Spiza americana*, and Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*^{2,10}. Recent documented additions to the Cozumel avifauna are American White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*, Mourning Warbler *Oporornis philadelphia* and Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina*^{2,11,13}. Macouzet & Escalante¹¹ also reported Orange-crowned Warbler *Vermivora celata*, Nashville Warbler *V. ruficapilla*, Canada Warbler *Wilsonia canadensis*, and Red-throated Ant-tanager *Habia fuscicauda*, but I question the identification of at least the first (23 September would be a notably early date for an Orange-crowned Warbler in eastern Mexico—and even in the eastern USA³) and last of these species (a sedentary resident on the mainland). Howell⁶ also listed recent records of Rose-throated Becard *Pachyrhamphus aglaiae*, Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus*, Grey-crowned Yellowthroat *Chamaethlypis poliocephala* and Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*, and most recently Gómez de Silva⁴ reported two species not listed by Howell & Webb⁸: Couch's Kingbird *Tyrannus couchii* and Grey Kingbird *T. dominicensis*.

This paper is based on 20 days of fieldwork during autumn and winter: 14–16 October 1993, 3–5 December 1996, 3–4 December 1998, 2–3 December 1999 (with Dan Lane), 30 November–1 December 2000 (with Rich Hoyer), 5–8 December 2001, 24–25 January 2002 (with David Yee) and 4–5 December 2003. Additional records of several species were contributed by Héctor Gómez de Silva (HGS) based on visits in 1998–2001, and by Rich Hoyer from a visit on 5–6 December 2002. I discuss the status of 29 species (12 not listed by Howell &

Webb⁸), as well as migration timing and the occurrence of non-breeding landbirds whose status on Cozumel is unresolved.

Black-bellied Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna autumnalis*

Seven at a pond on the east side of the island on 24 January 2002 were unmistakable: large reddish-brown ducks with long necks, bright red bills, grey faces with white eye-rings, and black bellies to undertail-coverts. In addition, HGS and M. Pérez Villafañá observed seven on Cozumel on 30 April 2001, and D. Klauber (pers. comm.) saw two families on 8 August 2001 (one with two young, the other with 5–6 young).

American Wigeon *Anas americana*

A female with a flock of 65 Blue-winged Teal *A. discors* on 1 December 2000. The wigeon was an overall reddish-brown dabbling duck, larger and stockier than the teal with a steep forehead, relatively short, black-tipped bluish bill, and a greyish head and upper neck.

Roadside Hawk *Buteo magnirostris gracilis*

This very distinctive endemic subspecies (or species?) was fairly common on Cozumel in the 1980s and at least through October 1993, but it has since undergone a marked decline. I have seen none in seven visits, 1996–2003, and Gómez de Silva⁴ (pers. comm.) detected only one in four days of intensive birding during late April 2001 and none in annual mid-November visits (of 2–5 days' duration) in 1998–2001. Reasons for the recent declines of this taxon and the two woodpeckers (see below) are unclear.

Short-tailed Hawk *Buteo brachypterus*

Although noted as resident by Howell & Webb⁸, this species may simply be a wanderer from the mainland (as appears true of other raptors such as Hook-billed Kite *Chondrohierax uncinatus* and Bat Falcon *Falco rufigularis*). I have seen none in recent trips and the only records known to me are single light-morph birds on 15 February 1982 (pers. obs.), 3 November 1983¹⁶ and 12 May 1986 (pers. obs.).

Mangrove Cuckoo *Coccyzus minor*

Whilst perhaps a breeding resident, as listed by Howell & Webb⁸, my only records from Cozumel are from mid-October to early December, during which time they are often conspicuous and fairly common.

Northern Potoo *Nyctibius jamaicensis*

One observed at night on 24 January 2002. This unmistakable bird was found while spotlighting for nightjars. It was observed at 30-m range, with binoculars and telescope, perched on a bare snag from which it made flycatching sallies. Although known from the Greater Antilles and the Honduras Bay Islands¹, potoos have not been reported previously from Cozumel.

Green-breasted Mango *Anthracothorax prevostii*

Listed as resident in Appendix D of Howell & Webb⁸, but correctly described as a summer resident in the species accounts. Mangos arrive on Cozumel in mid to late January and are common through at least mid-July, but I have not seen any on the island in October–December.

Yucatán Woodpecker *Centurus p. pygmaeus* and **Golden-fronted Woodpecker** *Centurus aurifrons leei*

These endemic subspecies appear to have undergone a marked decline on Cozumel in the 1990s (cf. Roadside Hawk). In the 1980s and early 1990s (at least through October 1993) both were common and conspicuous (with 5–10 of each seen easily in a morning). However, in 1996–2003 I found both uncommon to rare, recording only 2–10 Yucatán Woodpeckers and 0–2 Golden-fronted Woodpeckers in 2–3 days birding. The experience of HGS with these species on Cozumel in recent years is similar, and he has detected no Golden-fronted Woodpeckers (pers. comm.).

Yellow-bellied Elaenia *Elaenia flavogaster*

This distinctive species were heard (but not seen) near El Cedral on 7 December 2001. On 5 December 2003, one was studied carefully and heard in brushy fields near El Cedral: a typical *Elaenia*, small bill dull flesh-pink below and tipped dark; bushy crest with conspicuous whitish base; and overall paler than Caribbean *Elaenia*, with paler wingbars and brighter yellow belly. Calls heard were a burry *breahr* and bickering chatters, quite distinct from those of Caribbean *Elaenia E. martinica*. This species exhibits some winter withdrawal from the Atlantic slope of Mexico in winter⁸, and the Cozumel records may represent wanderers from the mainland, although habitat on the island appears suitable for a breeding population.

Eastern Pewee *Contopus virens*

An abundant transient on Cozumel, at least in autumn, with a notably late record of an immature studied on 4 December 1997 (J. Dunn pers. comm.). This bird was an obvious *Contopus* with a long primary projection, fresh plumage (indicating an immature) and an orange-based mandible tipped dark. The upperparts were washed greenish, the wingbars rather bold and whitish, and the underparts whitish with a greyish wash across the breast and onto the flanks. Relative to Tropical Pewee it was greener dorsally and paler ventrally, with long wings. Relative to Western Pewee *C. sordidulus* (unknown in the Yucatán Peninsula) it was greener dorsally and whiter ventrally.

Tropical Pewee *Contopus cinereus*

This species, partially migratory on the mainland⁸, is a rare visitor to Cozumel: my only record is one seen and heard on 1 December 2000.

Yucatán Flycatcher *Myiarchus yucatanensis lanyoni*

Although described as a resident taxon¹⁵, I have not found Yucatán Flycatchers on Cozumel during late November to January visits, and Gómez de Silva⁴ (pers. comm.) detected none in four days of intensive birding during late April 2001 or in annual mid-November visits in 1998–2001. Further work is needed to elucidate the present status on Cozumel.

Dusky-capped Flycatcher *Myiarchus tuberculifer platyrhynchus*

Although described as an endemic taxon absent in winter¹⁵, I saw and heard small numbers on Cozumel in early-December 1996, 2001 and 2003 (but detected none in 1998, 1999, 2000, or 2002). These may have been lingering migrants (see Discussion). Brown-crested Flycatchers *M. tyrannulus* are common summer residents on Cozumel but absent in winter, as reported by Parkes¹⁵.

Couch's Kingbird *Tyrannus couchii*

Two seen and heard (including calls and dawn song tape-recorded by Dan Lane, deposited at Louisiana State University) on the south side of San Miguel, on 2–3 December 1999, one giving dawn song at the airport, on 8 December 2001, and one calling near El Cedral, on 5 December 2003. These records and small numbers in April 2001⁴ suggest this vocally conspicuous species may have recently colonised Cozumel.

Grey-collared Becard *Pachyramphus major*

A female found by Dan Lane at El Cedral, on 3 December 1999, was presumably a vagrant. This uncommon species appears to be an altitudinal migrant in montane Mexico⁸ and it may be that the

lowland Yucatán population is also prone to wandering in the non-breeding season.

Rose-throated Becard *Pachyrhamphus aglaiae*

I observed an adult male and female associating at a fruiting tree on the south side of San Miguel, on 4 December 1996. Presumably these were wanderers from the mainland and they constitute a first island record. They were large-headed and thick-billed birds slightly smaller and more compact than nearby Tropical Kingbirds *Tyrannus melancholicus*. The male was overall medium-pale grey, darker above, with a rose throat patch; the female was greyish above with a darker cap, and pale buff collar and underparts.

Warbling Vireo *Vireo gilvus*

One studied in a fruiting tree on the south side of San Miguel, on 16 October 1993, is a first island record, and appears to be the first record for the Yucatán Peninsula^{8,9}. It was smaller and smaller billed than a nearby Yucatán Vireo *V. magister* (but longer billed and longer tailed than Philadelphia Vireo *V. philadelphia*) with a more diffuse face pattern lacking any distinct dark eyestripe. The crown and upperparts were fairly uniform olive-grey with a broad pale supercilium and large dark eye; the underparts were dingy whitish with a faint lemon wash on the flanks; the bill was mostly pale fleshy grey with a dark culmen, the legs blue-grey. This is a drab but distinctive bird with which I am very familiar. The relatively long and mostly pale bill together with the diffuse face pattern suggested an Eastern Warbling Vireo *V. g. gilvus*¹⁷.

Blue-grey Gnatcatcher *Polioptila caerulea cozumelae*

This endemic taxon remains common on the island. It differs in appearance and voice from mainland Blue-grey Gnatcatchers (looking more like Bahama birds) and may be specifically distinct.

Swainson's Thrush *Catharus ustulatus*

Singles at El Cedral on 7 December 2001 and 5 December 2002 were presumably late migrants, as this species does not winter in the Yucatán Peninsula⁸.

Palm Warbler *Dendroica palmarum*

A Yellow Palm Warbler *D. p. paludicola* was at the sewage treatment plant on 3 December 1998. Whilst the nominate race of Palm Warbler is a common winter visitor to coastal Yucatán and Cozumel, the striking race *paludicola* is notably rare in Mexico, with only one previous record: from Isla Holbox on 15 April 1987⁷.

Grey-crowned Yellowthroat *Chamaethlypis poliocephala*

Howell & Webb⁸ considered this species' occurrence on Cozumel unconfirmed but its presence has since been verified (first recorded on 5 October 1991; HGS). It is, in fact, locally fairly common in suitable habitat, e.g. up to ten (singing and calling) seen in a morning in scrubby fields near El Cedral on numerous occasions (pers. obs., HGS). That Grey-crowned Yellowthroats were unrecorded by earlier visitors suggests the species may have colonised Cozumel as a result of increased forest clearing.

Wilson's Warbler *Wilsonia pusilla*

Singles at the sewage treatment plant on 30 November 2000 and El Cedral on 6 December 2001 are the first records from Cozumel. Both were dull-coloured individuals typical of the nominate eastern race, which is a rare winter visitor to the Yucatán Peninsula. They were olive above (with no wingbars or tail-spots) and dull yellow below with a large dark beady eye, cocked tail and dry *chek* call. The 2000 bird was a female, the 2001 bird a male with a black cap.

Rose-throated Tanager *Piranga roseogularis*

This is another species that was fairly common on Cozumel in the 1980s and early 1990s but which HGS and I have not found in 1996–2003 visits. However, Hoyer reported one on 5 December 2002. More work is needed to determine its present status on Cozumel.

Blue-black Grassquit *Volatinia jacarina*

Overlooked by Howell & Webb⁸, small numbers occur locally (perhaps irregularly?) on Cozumel. Recent records at El Cedral include five on 4 December 1996, 20+ on 2 December 1999, 4–5 on 29 April 2001 (HGS), 2–3 on 6 December 2001, 4–5 on 24 January 2002, and one on 5 December 2003.

Grasshopper Sparrow *Ammodramus savannarum*

Recent records from Cozumel are few and suggest it may be a transient migrant rather than a winter visitor, *contra* Howell & Webb⁸: 2–3 at El Cedral on 1 December 2000 (pers. obs.), one in an abandoned field beside the cross-island highway on 4 December 1998 (HGS), and one at the sewage treatment plant on 30 April 2001⁴.

Savannah Sparrow *Passerculus sandwichensis*

Singles were at San Gervasio, on 4 December 1998 (HGS) and at El Cedral, on 3 December 1999. The latter was a small sparrow with a small pinkish bill, slightly cleft tail, faint yellow supraloral wash and high *tsip* call note; the brownish upperparts and whitish underparts were strongly dark-streaked. Savannah Sparrows are regular winter

migrants to the Yucatán Peninsula but there appear to be no previous records from Cozumel.

Lincoln's Sparrow *Melospiza lincolni*

Two were at El Cedral, on 3 December 1999, and one there on 1 December 2000. These were fairly small, slender sparrows with a relatively slender greyish bill, fairly long, slightly graduated tail and 'smacking' *tsk!* call. The grey-brown upperparts were dark-streaked with no distinct wingbars, and a grey supercilium, and the malar and finely dark-streaked chest were washed buff. These were probably transients and represent the first records from Cozumel.

Lesser Goldfinch *Carduelis psaltria*

Although not reported prior to the 1990s⁸, small numbers of Lesser Goldfinches are now seen regularly around El Cedral. Most adult males are black-backed but an occasional green-backed male is seen, which suggests that some (all?) may have derived from escaped cage birds. Recent records include 15 on 15 October 1993, six on 3 December 1996, 8+ on 3 December 1998, eight on 2 December 1999, 15+ on 30 November 2000, 15 on 6 December 2001, six on 24 January 2002 and 4–5 December 2003.

Discussion

The species accounts here include ten breeding residents or presumed residents, two breeding species of irregular or seasonal occurrence (Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and Green-breasted Mango), nine Neotropical migrants and eight species of uncertain status. Of the residents, four endemic taxa appear to have undergone marked population declines since the early 1990s: Roadside Hawk, Yucatán Woodpecker, Golden-fronted Woodpecker and Rose-throated Tanager. The present status of Yucatán Flycatcher is also uncertain. Whilst Cozumel Thrasher *Toxostoma guttatum* numbers declined abruptly following Hurricane Gilbert in September 1998^{8,12}, the above species remained fairly numerous through at least October 1993, and only appear to have declined since then. Of possible relevance is that the *Boa constrictor*, apparently introduced to Cozumel in 1971, has become common on the island and could be impacting native bird populations¹⁴.

The nine Neotropical migrants occurred mostly during migration, although some may have been wintering on the island. Of note were the markedly larger numbers of migrants during early-December visits than during late January (with comparable field coverage of sites). For example, mean daily maxima for selected warblers around El Cedral in early December (over five years) were 19 Northern Parulas *Parula americana*, 12 Magnolia *Dendroica magnolia*, 17 Black-throated Green *D. virens* and

15 Palm Warblers, 30 American Redstarts *Setophaga ruticilla*, six Black-and-white Warblers *Mniotilta varia*, ten Ovenbirds *Seiurus aurocapilla*, and 20 Common Yellowthroats *Geothlypis trichas*. In late-January 2002, numbers over the entire island were notably lower: at El Cedral I noted seven Northern Parulas, one Magnolia, five Black-throated Green and six Palm Warblers, 15 American Redstarts, three Black-and-white Warblers, one Ovenbird and five Common Yellowthroats—only 10–50% of early-December numbers. This suggests that migration on Cozumel extends regularly into early December. Records of species that do not winter in the region from Cozumel (Eastern Pewee and Swainson's Thrush) and from the Yucatán mainland (Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus* at Río Lagartos, Yucatán, on 1 December 1998; Chimney Swift *Chaetura pelagica* at Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Quintana Roo, on 27 November 2000; pers. obs.) support the premise that birds are still on passage at this season.

The eight species of uncertain status are an interesting mix. Yellow-bellied Elaenia and Tropical Pewee are partial migrants on the mainland, and as such they could be expected to wander to Cozumel occasionally, as occurs with Red-legged Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes cyaneus*. The same may be true for Couch's Kingbird and the two becards, which are frugivores that wander in search of food. Mangrove Cuckoo is an enigmatic species in much of its range and more data are needed for Cozumel, where it may breed. Short-tailed Hawk and Northern Potoo may be irregular (non-breeding?) visitors, but again more data are needed.

The Cozumel list stood at 160 species in 1926, when Griscom⁵ noted that 'our knowledge of the avifauna of Cozumel Island is fairly complete.' The Cozumel list is now at least 224 species but much remains to be learned about the breeding status, seasonal occurrence, migration timing and inter-annual abundance of most species recorded from this interesting island. Observers visiting Cozumel can assist by keeping careful notes of species recorded. Studies are needed to ascertain the breeding status and possible causes for decline of a number of species formerly common on the island.

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