

The threatened birds of Cuba project report

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Se realizaron estudios de seis endemismos cubanos: *Geotrygon caniceps*, *Starnoenas cyanocephala*, *Aratinga euops*, *Amazona leucocephala*, *Calypte helenae* y *Colaptes fernandinae* sobre un período de cuatro meses en 1995. Aquí se describen algunos de los principales resultados del proyecto en lo que concierne a estas especies. También se realizaron observaciones de *Accipiter gundlachi* y *Torreornis inexpectata*.



Top: Fernandina's Flickers. Field sketches by Lyn Wells

Left: Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae* (L. Wells)

Bottom: Blue-headed Quail-dove *Geotrygon cyanocephala*.
Painting by Lyn Wells





La Majagua near Bermejas, site of a Fernandina Flicker colony (L. Wells)

An earlier article⁴ outlined the proposals and aims of the project. This is the promised report on our work. The fieldwork was scheduled to last a year but various difficulties limited it to four months. Our disappointment was tempered by the results.

We studied nine of our original 20 target species but managed worthwhile observations on only six: Grey-faced Quail-dove *Geotrygon caniceps*, Blue-headed Quail-dove *Starnoenas cyanocephala*, Cuban Parakeet *Aratinga euops*, Cuban Amazon *Amazona leucocephala*, Bee Hummingbird *Calypte helenae*, Fernandina's Flicker *Colaptes fernandinae*. Of the remaining species, Gundlach's Hawk *Accipiter gundlachii* was seen only once, which is perhaps not unexpected given the perilous state of this endemic raptor, and Zapata Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata* on just one occasion because we were unable to gain the necessary permits to work in the relevant area.

Three weeks were spent in La Güira National Park in the western province of Piñar del Río, an incredibly beautiful place of virtually untouched forest in dramatic limestone hills. The Cuban Solitaire *Myadestes elisabeth* can be located by the male's amazing song, a slow, measured delivery in three phrases with a haunting flute-like quality when heard at a distance (although it has been likened to a rusty gate!). At close quarters, the song is complex, and defies description. Bond² states that the species nests on a bank or steep slope, with Balát & Gonzalez¹ suggesting that it "nests in rock fissures, usually more than 6 m above the ground". A possible nest site was discovered in a limestone cliff but the birds are very difficult to follow in the dense woodland. Radio-tracking during the breeding season might produce better results. Between 8–12 singing males were located in an area of c.1 km², representing a reasonable-sized population.

It is considered Near-Threatened³ perhaps as it is restricted to this limestone-based habitat. Currently, there is ample protection (in the form of national parks and faunal refuges) and no reason to suspect a decline in numbers.

The six target species listed above were studied principally in the Ciénaga de Zapata National Park in south Matanzas province. The Zapata Swamp is an enormous area of both swamp and dry woodland with relatively little human settlement. We concentrated on an area around Bermejas, a tiny village 12 km north-east of Playa Giron (the site of the Bay of Pigs invasion in the early 1960s), where we camped close to the house of the local forest guard, Orlando Ramirez, whose help and advice were invaluable. On the first evening a pair of Blue-headed Quail-doves wandered slowly through his garden pecking at seeds, not 20 m from where we stood! In fact, the area near his house was a real hotspot for this species and a morning watch at a nearby well produced at least 15 individuals. We gained valuable behavioural information at this site as the birds interacted with each other and with all three other quail-doves found in Cuba – Ruddy Quail-dove *Geotrygon montana*, Key West Quail-dove *G. chrysis*, and Grey-faced Quail-dove, another near-threatened species³.

The habitat in this area consists of three distinct zones: a coastal strip of woodland 1–2 km wide characterised by low species diversity, a maximum height of c.7 m, and very few palm trees. Next, a strip of approximately the same width, locally known as "costanera", with a much greater diversity, height up to 10 m or more and many palm trees. The difference between these two zones appears mainly to be due to soil depth on top of the limestone bed. The third zone is wet swamp which is, however, dry from October–May. Both target species of quail-dove were found in all three zones in deep cover. However, a series of census walks suggested that Blue-headed is less numerous near wetter areas – lending weight to the theory that the wetter areas suit the Grey-faced (considered the rarer bird in Cuba) with its longer tarsi. Both species are considered good eaters and are hunted by baiting drop-traps ("casillas") with orange seeds. Little is known of the Blue-headed Quail-dove's nesting behaviour as birds are extremely difficult to follow. The most efficient method would be to radio-track birds to their nest sites.

Our observations of the two psittacine species could scarcely have been more contrasting – Cuban Parakeet was seen on only one census whilst

Cuban Amazon was seen on all but two. The Zapata region rises barely 1–2 m above sea-level for kilometers in every direction. The accepted method of censusing parrots is to count at roost sites “from a suitable high vantage point”!

Cuban Amazon was recorded daily, including a flock of 42 on one occasion. This presents a conservation problem as chicks are still taken for sale as pets, despite the best efforts of a dedicated group of forest rangers. Cuban Parakeet is rarely seen, even by the rangers, and everyone we spoke to agreed that numbers had declined. A few pairs and a flock of 18 were seen (the latter at a site known to us for six years), but it is very hard to guess just how many remain. If the habitat remains largely undisturbed, then there is probably no immediate threat of extinction, but a focused study of this rare parakeet is required.

The costanera zone also appears to provide the favoured habitat of the smallest bird in the world – the Bee Hummingbird. Orlando Ramirez, the forest guard, showed us our first male near his home and once attuned to the shrill whistling ‘song’ it was possible to make reasonably accurate censuses. Males prefer to sing near the top of the highest tree within the territory. It was apparent that many more were present than Orlando had thought in a relatively small area; Zapata has long been known as the species’ stronghold. It is listed as Near-Threatened³ principally because its requirements are insufficiently known – the problems of studying such a small bird are obvious. What is apparent is that its range has contracted over the last 30 years and a better understanding of why this has occurred should help to prevent further losses.

Our main reason for visiting Bermejas was to study Fernandina’s Flicker, the endemic woodpecker which has declined alarmingly and which the present research demonstrated to be in serious difficulty with probably fewer than 250 birds left in total. It was possible to study a nesting ‘colony’ of c.20 birds near Orlando’s house, where we learned much of its feeding and courtship behaviour. LW was using field sketching to record all types of behaviour, and distilled these into paintings depicting typical poses and actions. Its habits and problems, one of which is loss of nest sites, are now better understood. The species nests in dead palm trees, in common with the Cuban Amazon, and people looking for parrot chicks topple dead palms to reach the nests. Not only is that clutch or brood lost, but the site is permanently destroyed.

The reasons behind Fernandina’s Flicker’s patchy distribution remain unknown. Feeding and nesting sites very similar to those visited are available throughout the swamp – yet the species is absent. The colony near Bermejas appears to be unique, as elsewhere throughout the current range only single nests are found. The future looks uncertain for this cryptic woodpecker. Two papers are in preparation describing our work on Fernandina’s Flicker.

There is insufficient space here to present all our findings but if you are interested, a copy of our complete report⁵ has been deposited at BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK. If you wish to study some of the birds in Cuba or simply go birdwatching, please get in touch and we will be pleased to help. We are planning to go back in 1998.

References

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