

The Threatened Birds of Cuba Project

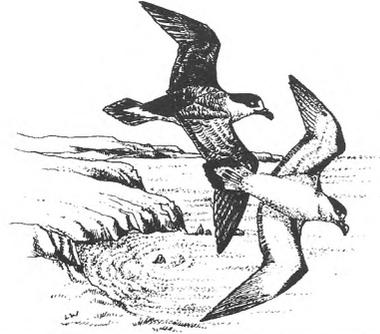
Andy Mitchell and Lyn Wells

I first visited Cuba in 1987 when the economic situation was generally better than it is now - the socialist economic alliance COMECON was alive and kicking so basic commodities (food, fuel, medicines etc.) were in reasonable supply. Three friends and I went for a birding trip to a country that, for British birdwatchers, was virtually unknown. The discovery of a wonderful country and warm, friendly people was tempered by the feeling that a number of the birds we had seen were in trouble. This was borne out with the publication in 1992 of *Threatened Birds of the Americas: the ICBP/IUCN Red Data Book* which documented 20 species of threatened or near-threatened birds, of which 12 are endemic to Cuba.

The country's political and economic isolation since the revolution in 1959 has meant that resources for research have been very limited (although the Canadians from Long Point Bird Observatory have been working hard in the Zapata Swamp) and results have not been published to a wider audience. Economically, things are now extremely difficult, so outside funding and gaining experience from visiting scientists etc. appears to be the only way to increase the knowledge-base.

The "Threatened Birds of Cuba Project" is the result of these observations. Lyn Wells (whose painting of Cuba's national bird on the front cover of this *Cotinga* is for sale by postal auction) and I will be working with Orlando Garrido from the Museum of Natural History "Felipe Poey" in Havana. We have also enlisted the help of Orlando Torres at the University of Havana for both his knowledge of Cuba's birds and to assist in finding suitable counterparts to work with us. We plan to be in the field for a year, gathering data on and reference material for the illustration of each of the study species.

Our knowledge of Cuba's endangered birds is, at best, fragmentary and the project aims to pool all the available information on each species and then try to fill in the gaps. Fieldwork is specifically targeted to avoid duplication of previous work except, of course, where this will provide a useful comparison. For in-



Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata* (Lyn Wells)

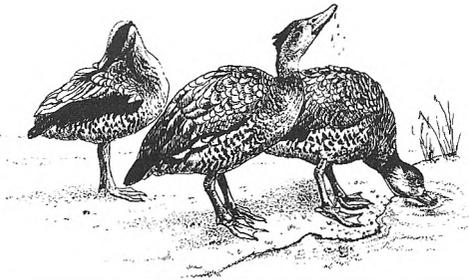
stance, Lammertink's search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (see next article) will not be repeated in such depth but we will be working on the other species in that area. Only when a comprehensive database for each species is available can sound conservation decisions be made and thus the results of the project, or rather the fieldwork, will be made available to the relevant institutions in Cuba and all interested international bodies. The project will not end there. We decided early on that it was not enough to simply do the fieldwork, publish and move on.

Cuba is a sophisticated country, both culturally and technologically, compared with most of its Caribbean and Central American neighbours and the inevitable political and economic changes in the next few years should see an explosion in growth with the consequent pressures on the environment.

We are in a unique position to evaluate and plan for these pressures **before** the growth occurs. The Cubans themselves have a healthy interest and attitude to conservation but need expertise and funds to plan adequately for the future. So we intend that a book should be published that will not only include the data, some insights into Cuba and its people but also high-quality illustrations of the species. We hope that the book will increase awareness of both Cuba and the plight of its birds. Profits from the book sales, together with money raised from exhibitions, slide shows etc. will all go towards conservation in Cuba.

The 20 study species are as follows (the endemics are marked with an asterisk *):

Black-capped Petrel
Pterodroma hasitata
 West Indian Whistling-duck
Dendrocygna arborea
 *Gundlach's Hawk
Accipiter gundlachi
 *Zapata Rail
Cyanolimnas cerverai
 Plain Pigeon
Columba inornata
 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
 *Ivory-billed Woodpecker
Campephilus principalis
 *Giant Kingbird
Tyrannus cubensis
 Bahama Swallow
Tachycineta cyaneoviridis
 *Cuban Solitaire
Myadestes elisabeth
 *Cuban Gnatcatcher
Polioptila lembeyi
 *Zapata Wren
Ferminia cerverai
 Bachman's Warbler
Vermivora bachmani
 *Zapata Sparrow
Torreornis inexpectata
 Palm Crow
Corvus palmarum



West Indian Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna arborea*
 (Lyn Wells)

The information on each species has been documented in the Red Data Book but this is not comprehensive due to the constraints in producing a book of that kind. Lyn and I have been conducting further research since January this year but I am sure there are many more references to uncover. So if you, or someone you know has been to Cuba, either for research purposes or just birding, please get in touch. Any sightings of the study species, preferably with a place name and date, will be most welcome.

The fieldwork methodology for each species is different due to the birds' habits, the level of our existing knowledge and the type of threat. However, in broad terms our aims are:

1. To provide accurate and up-to-date information on the status and distribution of the endangered species.
2. To produce accurate and up-to-date information on behaviour, food requirements and nesting requirements.
3. To produce accurate and artistic representations of each species.
4. To highlight Cuba as an important area of unique birds and stimulate further interest in the whole range of birdlife, both in the country itself and abroad.
5. To give the Cuban authorities a broader information base to assist them in taking appropriate conservation measures.
6. To use the information gained, particularly the artwork, for educational purposes in Cuba.
7. To pass on artistic and ornithological skills to Cuban students.

Finally, we need money! The more we can raise, the longer we can "employ" Cubans to work with us. So if you, your institution or company can contribute, either directly or by making an offer for the original of this issue's cover, please write to me at the address below and I will send you a full prospectus. We will be keeping *Cotinga* up-to-date with our progress and will, of course, write another article on our return from Cuba.

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