
Parc National La Visite, Haiti: a last refuge for the country's montane birds

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Le Parc National La Visite, situé au sud est d'Haïti, abrite le seul grand ensemble forestier de montagne du Massif de la Selle, composé de feuillus et de conifères. Cet article présente les archives et les données actuelles concernant la liste des espèces menacées et endémiques, bases sur des références bibliographiques et sur une visite effectuée début janvier 2000. Au moins 24 espèces endémiques et 12 espèces considérées comme menacées/presque-menacées dans la liste *Birds to watch* 2^o sont présentes dans le parc La Visite, qui est de plus une zone privilégiée pour le Pétril diabolique *Pterodroma hasitata* et pour la Merle de la Selle *Turdus swalesi*. A cause de la déforestation important du reste de l'île, le parc de La Visite constitue clairement une zone de conservation pour la faune endémique et menacée d'Haïti. Nous espérons avec cet article attirer l'attention des visiteurs et des scientifiques sur ce parc, et ainsi accroître les efforts de conservations déjà entrepris.

El Parque Nacional La Visite, al sureste de Haití, contiene el único remanente considerable de bosque montano y de pinos en el Macizo de la Selle. En este artículo resumimos los registros contemporáneos e históricos para el parque de especies globalmente amenazadas o endémicas, con base en la literatura y una breve visita en enero del 2000. Por lo menos 24 especies endémicas y 12 especies señaladas como amenazadas/casi amenazadas en *Birds to watch* 2^o han sido reportadas en La Visite, y el parque es un refugio global para el Diablotín *Pterodroma hasitata* y el Zorzal de la Selle *Turdus swalesi*. Como la mayor parte de Haití está deforestado, La Visite constituye una clara oportunidad para conservar una avifauna única y en peligro, aunque existan serias amenazas sobre él. Con este artículo esperamos atraer visitantes e investigadores al parque, y así ayudar los esfuerzos de conservación que allí se están desarrollando.

Introduction

Parc National La Visite is 22 km south of Port-au-Prince, in the Massif de la Selle, at 18°20'N 72°20'W. It encompasses c.3,000 ha of pine forest, savanna and montane cloud forest, at 1,900–2,268 m^{6,13}. La Visite is in the west of the Massif de la Selle—Sierra de Baoruco (Dominican Republic), in south Hispaniola. Vegetation consists of dry forest (below 1,000 m), through semi-deciduous forest, rain forest (above 500 m), cloud forest (600–2,300 m) and, predominantly, pine forest⁹. La Visite holds pine forest, broadleaf cloud forest, natural savanna and juniper forest. It boasts three peaks above 2,150 m: La Visite, Cabaio and Tete Opaque. The area is characterised by thick topsoil on a limestone matrix⁶.

Flora and vertebrate fauna are well documented. The park boasts 85 species of vascular plants endemic to Hispaniola, 36 unique to the La Selle range¹³. The avifauna is also impressive: of 67 species recorded, 17 are endemic to Hispaniola. A total of six genera and 23 species are restricted to Hispaniola (ranges of <50,000 km²), and the entire island is considered an Endemic Bird Area—EBA 028—by Stattersfield *et al.*⁹. However, forest cover in Haiti is only 1.5% of the land area, making La Visite a major refuge for forest-dependent species in the country¹².

On 2–5 January 2000, we made observations of the avifauna and habitat condition in Parc National La Visite and its environs. All records of Endangered [EN], Vulnerable [VU] or Near-threatened [NT] species^{2,3} are summarised, as are those with restricted ranges [RR]⁹ of <50,000 km². In so doing, we seek to highlight the conservation importance of the protected area.

Logistics

Access is via the mountain road from Port-au-Prince to Kenscoff, thence by hiking along the narrow trail to Seguin, on the southern edge of La Visite. It is also possible to access Seguin via a very steep uphill trail from Marigot, which can be reached by road from the historic port of Jacmel. In both cases, the hike requires at least six hours. The trails from Kenscoff to Seguin, and to Marigot, are major pedestrian thoroughfares, but amenities are scarce, especially below Seguin. No facilities exist within the park, although there is a fairly expensive and pleasant, bed and breakfast—the Auberge du Visite—in Seguin.

We reached Kenscoff in the afternoon of 2 January, explored the road into the mountains that evening and spent the night at the Hotel La Florville. We left before dawn next day and hiked to the park, arriving at 13h00 and spent the afternoon birding in the forest, before camping there. We spent a couple of hours birding at night, but high winds precluded any bird records. Observations were made within the park until 12h00 on 4th, before returning to Seguin for the night. The following morning we walked to Marigot, arriving mid-afternoon and returning by road to Port-au-Prince, via Jacmel.

Birds of La Visite

The most important and interesting species are those typical of Hispaniolan montane and pine forests. La Selle Thrush *Turdus swalesi* [EN, RR], one of the specialities, was easily observed in small numbers in early morning, with numerous Red-legged Thrushes *T. plumbeus*. *T. swalesi* was initially thought restricted to the dense, moist thickets of Massif de La Selle, where the type-specimen was taken in 1927¹⁰, but was subsequently found at 1,500–2,100 m in the Sierra de Baoruco, Sierra de Neiba and Cordillera Central, Dominican Republic¹². It appears to occur at higher

densities in the Massif de La Selle than elsewhere and is undoubtedly threatened by habitat destruction^{2,3,7}. Rufous-throated Solitaire *Myadestes genibarbis* [RR] sings prior to dawn in the forest but is extremely elusive, as is the winter visitor Bicknell's Thrush *Catharus bicknelli* [VU], reported by Woods & Ottenwalder¹².

Easily seen in broadleaf montane forest, the attractive Narrow-billed Tody *Todus angustirostris* [RR] is shy in dense thickets, especially in sinkholes, where we recorded three. Its close relative, Broad-billed Tody *T. subulatus* [RR], occurs at lower elevations; we recorded it in deciduous scrub and fruit trees lower down, between Seguin and Marigot. At La Selle it ranges to 1,700 m¹⁰. Golden Swallow *Tachycineta euchrysea* [VU, RR] is not uncommon over the forest; we recorded it between Kenscoff and La Visite and within the park. Both White-collared Swift *Streptoprocne zonaris* and Antillean Palm-swift *Tachornis phoenicobia* often consort with the swallows.

Broadleaf forest hosts at least another six restricted-range Hispaniolan endemics. Hispaniolan Lizard-cuckoo *Saurothera longirostris* [RR] was reportedly fairly abundant at the Massif de La Selle, in spring 1927¹⁰, but we saw only a single. Green-tailed Ground Warbler *Microligea palustris* [RR] is common in moist forest, to which it is restricted in Haiti, though it is frequent in dry forest across the border⁷. The other four restricted-range species are all common, both in forest and degraded habitats between Kenscoff and Seguin: Hispaniolan Emerald *Chlorostibon swainsonii* [RR], Hispaniolan Woodpecker *Melanerpes striatus* [RR], Hispaniolan Pewee *Contopus hispaniolensis* [RR] and Black-crowned Palm-tanager *Phaenicophilus palmarum* [RR].

Four rare endemics are known from broadleaf forest at La Visite. Though Wetmore & Swales¹⁰ found Hispaniolan Trogon *Priotelus roseigaster* [NT, RR] common at La Selle, it was rare when Woods & Ottenwalder¹² visited. Of even greater concern is the status of White-winged Warbler *Xenoligea montana* [VU, RR], reported, by Bond, as being 'common as *Microligea palustris*' on Morne La Selle in 1928¹⁰ but which now may be locally extirpated due to clearance and fragmentation of its moist forest habitat¹². The secretive Chat Tanager *Calyptophilus frugivorus* [VU, RR] was apparently common formerly¹², but we failed to find it, as did Wetmore & Swales in 1931¹⁰. The elusive Ashy-faced Owl *Tyto glaucops* [RR] is occasionally heard¹².

Coniferous forest, of the endemic pine *Pinus occidentalis*, has an extremely depauperate avian community of only three common residents¹². The isolated race of White-winged Crossbill *Loxia (leucoptera) megaplaga* is now considered a species⁹ and is seriously threatened [EN]¹. Its status on La Visite is unclear: Wetmore & Swales¹⁰ found it common, but others erratic¹²; we observed a single flock of c.30 individuals. More frequent is the endemic Antillean Siskin *Carduelis dominicensis* [RR], which we observed in large flocks, wherever there were pines, between Kenscoff and Seguin. Most abundant is the ubiquitous Pine Warbler *Dendroica pinus*, which is common in pines across the massif.

The steep north-facing limestone escarpment of La Selle is of great importance for what is probably the world's largest colony of Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata* [EN]. Breeding populations were first found, above 1,500 m, on the escarpment in 1964¹¹. Woods & Ottenwalder¹² reported three colonies, two at Tete Opaque and one at Morne La Visite. They failed to find two more colonies located by Wingate¹¹, although total numbers detected during nocturnal surveys were still relatively high. Nonetheless, hunting, habitat decline, natural disasters and introduced predators imperil its survival in Haiti, which harbours the only significant breeding population⁷.

A number of interesting species persist outside forest. We recorded both Hispaniolan endemic crows: the distinctive call of the White-necked Crow *Corvus leucognaphalus* [VU, RR] was heard near Kenscoff, on 4 January, while Hispaniolan Palm Crow *C. palmarum* [NT, RR] was observed in large flocks throughout the massif. Garrido *et al.*⁴ consider this and the Cuban form to be specifically distinct. Similarly, Hispaniolan Stripe-headed Tanager *Spindalis dominicensis* was accorded species status by Garrido *et al.*⁵; it also has a range of <50,000 sq. km⁹. We found it in scrub between Kenscoff and La Visite. The endemic Palmchat *Dulus dominicus* [RR], a monotypic family, is common up to 1,800 m on La Selle¹⁰.

Both Hispaniolan Parakeet *Aratinga chloroptera* [VU, RR] and Hispaniolan Parrot *Amazona ventralis* [VU, RR] were found commonly by Wetmore & Swales¹⁰, at lower elevations around La Visite, but have seriously declined since¹²; we recorded neither. They are heavily trapped and now extinct over much of Haiti⁷. West Indian endemics common in the massif include Greater Antillean Bullfinch *Loxigilla violacea*, Greater Antillean Grackle *Quiscalus niger*, Black-cowled Oriole *Icterus dominicensis* and Scaly-naped Pigeon *Columba squamosa*, while Vervain Hummingbird *Mellisuga minima* [RR], Greater Antillean Elaenia *Elaenia fallax* [RR] and Antillean Euphonia *Euphonia musica* [RR] are uncommon at La Selle¹². Antillean Piculet *Nesocittes micromegas* is notably absent from La Selle, as it was even during Wetmore's expeditions¹⁰.

Finally, the entire region is of considerable interest for overwintering Nearctic migrants. For example, we recorded Merlin *Falco columbarius*, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker *Sphyrapicus varius*, Northern Parula *Parula americana*, Magnolia *Dendroica magnolia*, Cape May *D. tigrina*, Black-throated Blue *D. caerulescens*, Yellow-rumped *D. coronata*, Yellow-throated *D. dominica*, Prairie *D. discolor*, Palm *D. palmarum*, Black-and-white *Mniotilta varia* and Worm-eating Warblers *Helmitheros vermivorus*, American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla*, Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapillus* and Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*, largely in good numbers and often in degraded habitat.

Discussion

No fewer than 12 threatened/near-threatened and 24 restricted-range species have been recorded in La Selle; ongoing taxonomic revisions may increase these totals. The massif is particularly important for *Turdus swalesi*, which is easily seen, and *Pterodroma hasitata*. Nationally, La Visite is of critical importance, being one of only two protected areas within Haiti for montane broadleaf and pine forest species¹².

Detailed management and research plans for Haiti's natural parks have been proposed, and specific projects have

attracted World Bank support and government endorsement¹³ (see <http://www.secid.org/LAC.html>). Nevertheless, we found evidence of repeated burning of pine stands within the park and observed local shepherds grazing goats and sheep in lush grass in fire-cleared areas. This local practice, reported within park boundaries since 1983, threatens to further fragment the little remaining habitat throughout La Selle⁶.

La Visite presents a clear opportunity to preserve a unique and endangered avifauna. By offering logistical information to potential visitors, we hope to increase international awareness of conservation issues in Haiti. Ornithologists can make a significant contribution to enforcing the park's protected status, by making opportunistic observations and supporting conservation efforts by established agencies at La Visite.

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