

NBC Conservation Awards Update

Having completed a review of the NBC Conservation Awards Programme 2001–2010 (Stuart *et al.* 2013), this article provides updates on recent awards. It also marks the beginning of what we hope will be a regular column reporting on the grants awarded.

The Juan Mazar Barnett Award

The Neotropical Bird Club is greatly honoured to be able to announce the creation of a *Juan Mazar Barnett Award*. The aim is to make an award of up to \$2,000 to be presented once a year in memory of Juan Mazar Barnett. This special award has been made possible thanks to a generous donation from Juan's family. The award seeks to encourage early-career Neotropical bird conservationists and researchers, and will be presented for the *NBC Conservation Award* proposal that best captures Juan's spirit: technical expertise combined with a passion for birds and bird conservation. The rules for entry for the award are exactly the same as for the standard *NBC Conservation Awards*, with the additional requirement that applicants must be relatively early in their careers as conservationists or researchers.

Ambassadors of the avifauna of Cusuco National Park, Honduras – US\$ 1,500

Project dates: April–May 2013

Summary: The project aimed to raise awareness and strengthen ownership amongst local communities of their avifauna protected within the Cusuco National Park, Honduras. It tackled a common conservation conundrum: how to elevate sustainable-use values (e.g. eco-tourism or non-timber forest products rather than extractive industries) of an area and generate local support for habitat protection rather than exploitation. This local support is necessary to ensure the conservation of the park, part of the Merendón mountain range, which supports 270 bird species, including the locally declining Green-throated Mountain-Gem *Lampornis viridipallens* and threatened migrants wintering within the pine-oak

zones such as Golden-cheeked Warbler *Setophaga chrysoparia*.

Training workshops were completed, with 43 prospective guides and 42 local students participating from four communities: Santo Tomás and Tierra Santa in the western region of the park and Buenos Aires and Bañaderos in the eastern region. The workshops covered general biology, adaptation and ecology of birds, bird conservation, migration, and the importance of birds as a natural resource. By the conclusion of the workshop, guides had acquired the basics of bird watching techniques and were familiar with the top 20 commonest species that occur in Cusuco cloud forests. Modifications were made during the workshops to tailor lessons towards guides with limited literacy. Evaluation during the course included image-based identification and working with guides in the field on use of equipment (binoculars and field guides), and identification of birds and their songs. The courses also covered basic monitoring and recording habitat associations. This was one of the most successful portions of the workshop: the students enjoyed searching for birds, using equipment new to them and being able to see up close the species that they know surround them on a daily basis. Most importantly, the guides, students and other members of the communities expressed gratitude that this initiative had been the first to include them or teach them about biodiversity. They told the instructors which topics they would like to keep studying. The result of this workshop is a community that is eager to learn and participate in future survey work with national and international visitors. The most avid birdwatchers expressed an interest in solidifying their ornithological skills by practising alongside visiting scientists from Operation Wallacea. They feel highly motivated now that they know how to use field guides, use binoculars and because they have access to this equipment. Several guides that received an introduction to biological monitoring and the organization of bird watching trips are expected to use the skills further in future.

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For full details about NBC Conservation Awards, please visit www.neotropicalbirdclub.org.



Uncovering life history traits and conservation strategies of the Golden Swallow *Tachycineta euchrysea*, a threatened and endemic passerine on the island of Hispaniola—US\$ 1,000 (2012) and US\$ 1,000 (2013)

Project dates: April–July 2012 and 2013

The Golden Swallow Project has spent two field seasons in 2012 and 2013 assessing the effectiveness of 88 nest boxes erected in 2008 for nesting Golden Swallows *Tachycineta euchrysea*. The project has: a) built nest boxes, which will be monitored each year with the help of Dominican students; b) completed informal presentations in local schools, raising awareness about the species and its importance; and c) developed a website in which sightings of Swallows can be registered, and that informs the public on the progress of the project.

The project team have spent two three-month field seasons in the high altitude, remote pine forests of Valle Nuevo National Park documenting the reproductive strategies of the Golden Swallow and feeding that information into monitoring and educational outreach programs. The next two years of the project are expected to have Dominican student involvement, extensive collaborations with an array of conservation initiatives, and expansion into other mountain ranges.

The Golden Swallow has been affected historically by habitat loss, but future loss is unlikely within remote areas of Valle Nuevo National Park (see photos on page 76). However, extensive logging in the past and wild fires in the late 20th century have left the Park with large expanses of early successional forest that lack the natural nesting cavities that swallows need. This problem is exacerbated by hunting of the main cavity-creator, Hispaniolan Woodpecker *Melanerpes striatus*, because it is a perceived crop pest. Furthermore Golden Swallows are predated by two species of introduced rats. The project is tackling these threats through the provision of

Left to right

Juan Bautista Pérez Rancier National Park, known colloquially as ‘Valle Nuevo’, lies in the extreme eastern zone of the Cordillera Central. The park comprises montane grasslands and Hispaniolan Pine forest ranging up to the highest local peak Alto Bandera at 2,842m. Valle Nuevo supports all the threatened Hispaniolan endemic birds (Justin Proctor).

Golden Swallows *Tachycineta euchrysea* are listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, having declined owing to a loss of nesting cavities following clearance of mature forest and hunting of the cavity-forming Hispaniolan Woodpecker *Melanerpes striatus*. Nest-boxes are providing an effective replacement (Justin Proctor) .

Golden Swallow *Tachycineta euchrysea* nest success has increased dramatically since switching boxes from trees to stand-alone artificial support posts which can be more easily predator-proofed (Justin Proctor).

nest boxes in place of natural cavities. These boxes are rat-proofed to prevent predation. Responding to high levels of depredation suffered by nesting swallows in the tree-mounted boxes in 2012, we relocated the nest-boxes to free standing poles with predator guards. We simultaneously built 100 additional nest-boxes that were either added to previous nesting sites where boxes were limited or established in new locations where swallows had been seen foraging the previous year.

The educational outreach component of the project emphasizes the ecological connections between mature forest stands, healthy woodpecker populations, and cavity nesters (such as the swallow and local parrots).

Marisol MATA and Justin PROCTOR
Website: <http://thegoldenswallow.org/>

REFERENCES

Stuart, T., Bird, J. & Lees, A. C. (2013) The Neotropical Bird Club Conservation Awards Programme 2001–2010. *Neotrop. Birding* 12: 16–24.

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