



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: SCOUTING TRIP REPORT

21 – 26 OCTOBER 2017

By Dylan Vasapolli



The Critically Endangered (IUCN) Ridgway's Hawk was one of the principal targets.

Overview

Birding Ecotours had long been planning to add the Dominican Republic on the island of Hispaniola to its list of destinations offered. An opportunity to scout the country came up at the end of October 2017 and saw tour leader Dylan Vasapolli undertake it. Although he would be by himself for the majority of the time, he did link up with a few local birders in key areas. That the trip not only was over a short time period and out of the main birding season, but also that it was a scouting trip meant that birding wasn't the sole focal point, because the birding sites, access to them, overall facilities, and accommodation options also had to be considered.

Despite this, and with no prior travels to the country, the scouting trip was a resounding success. Over 110 species were recorded (on a par with or slightly more than most short tours typically get), and all but two of the country's Hispaniola endemics were seen (the latter were not possible due to road-access difficulties), including the increasingly rare Bay-breasted Cuckoo and the Critically Endangered (IUCN) Ridgway's Hawk. Birding in the highlands of the Sierra de Bahoruco, complete with encountering the majority of the Hispaniola endemics in a single day, was the main highlight.

Detailed Report

Day 1, 21st October 2017. Arrival in Santo Domingo

After arriving in a bustling Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, I set out to collect a few things I would need for the next few days before heading to the National Botanical Garden in town, where I spent the afternoon searching for the first of the island's specials.

Numbers of **Antillean Palm Swifts** greeted me upon arrival, which were followed by the first of many **Hispaniolan Woodpeckers**, **Mourning** and **Common Ground Doves**, **Antillean Mango**, **Northern Mockingbird**, and the ever-ubiquitous **Bananaquit**. It wasn't long afterwards that I found the country's national bird, the social **Palmchat**, which proved to be quite common. Some exploration of the deeper woods produced **Red-legged Thrush**, **Black-crowned Tanager**, **Ovenbird**, **Black-and-white Warbler**, and **American Redstart** before a distinct, grating call gave away a **Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo**. It took some effort to actually see it, but eventually good looks were had. Soon afterwards the soft call of **Broad-billed Tody** sounded, and it showed far more easily than the cuckoo, giving me some great, close-up views and allowing me to truly appreciate how tiny this species is. A stream running through the garden proved productive as well, delivering the prized **West Indian Whistling Duck**, one of the best localities for this species, along with **Yellow-crowned Night Heron**, **Green Heron**, **Snowy Egret**, **Common Gallinule**, and **Solitary Sandpiper**. Some exploration of the more manicured grounds in the garden delivered a few more species such as **Grey Kingbird**, **Palm** and **Prairie Warblers**, and **Yellow-faced Grassquit**. Eventually I heard another one of the major targets, **Hispaniolan Parakeet**, and found a tree with a number of individuals perched inside. This also led me to a calling **Vervain Hummingbird**, the second-smallest bird in the world, which I found perched atop a tree after quite some effort. I could scarcely believe how small this bird was, appearing as a mere bump on the branch, before leaving the bird be and calling it a day.



Black-crowned Tanager showed well.

Day 2, 22nd October 2017. Santo Domingo to Villa Barrancolí

With a long transfer westward into the Sierra de Batoruco today I started early to allow me an afternoon to spend exploring the area. The long drive was pretty quiet, with the only notable species being **Turkey Vulture**, **Western Osprey**, and **American Kestrel**, before I arrived in the early afternoon. After arriving in the small village of Puerto Escondido I made my way to the nearby Villa Barrancolí, where I would spend the next two nights.

After settling in I headed out to explore the Rabo de Gato trail. Although the afternoon birding was on the slow side, the river flowing along the trail delivered **Yellow-crowned Night Heron**, **Green Heron**, **Belted Kingfisher**, and **Louisiana Waterthrush**, while the scrubby edges held **White-winged Dove**, **Vervain Hummingbird**, **Narrow-billed Tody**, **Hispaniolan Woodpecker**, **Northern Mockingbird**, and **Black-throated Blue Warbler**. The deeper tracts of forest held little besides **Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo** and **Red-legged Thrush**, while a section of palm trees had numbers of **Antillean Palm Swift** along with a few noisy **White-necked Crows** and many **Palmchats**. The distinctive sound of parrots broke the silence, and after running to a clearing I enjoyed a small group of both the prized **Hispaniolan Amazons** and **Hispaniolan Parakeets** flying overhead. A **Key West Quail-Dove** began hooting but went unseen despite lots of effort to track it down. The last sighting of the day went to a **Plain Pigeon** that was seen perched atop a bare branch.

Following a great dinner I met with Rafael, a local guide, to finalize our plans for the following day.



The elegant Red-legged Thrush

Day 3, 23rd October 2017. Sierra de Bahoruco

We started the morning very early, well before dawn, to allow us to arrive at the break of day in the montane forest of the Zapotén sector of the Sierra de Bahoruco. The track up the mountain was incredibly rough, but the headlights of the car revealed **Burrowing Owl** and a surprise **Greater Antillean Elaenia**, and shortly before arriving at Zapotén we enjoyed some great views of the difficult **Hispaniolan Nightjar**.

After arriving at Zapotén we parked the car and set off on foot. We had a spectacular morning here and were fortunate enough to enjoy practically all the specials of the area. Our first target was the rare **La Selle Thrush**, and we enjoyed some great views of two birds as they hopped along the tracks as it first began to get light. Soon after we saw our first **Green-tailed Warbler** and **Hispaniolan Spindalis** before picking up **Hispaniolan Pewee** and getting some daytime views of **Greater Antillean Elaenia**. A clearing in the trees allowed some good, but brief views of a skittish **Hispaniolan Trogon** along with **Hispaniolan Emerald** and **Narrow-billed Tody**, the latter proving to be extremely common in the area. A harsh call gave away **Western Chat-Tanager**, and we enjoyed some great, close-up views of this elusive species before it melted back into the thicket. We also soon picked up the other prized warbler here, **White-winged Warbler**, and enjoyed some great views of both this species and its cousin, **Green-tailed Warbler**, throughout the morning. A large fruiting tree was buzzing with birds, and here we enjoyed the small **Antillean Piculet**, **Rufous-throated Solitaire**, **Red-legged Thrush**, **Antillean Siskin**, **Black-crowned Tanager**, **Hispaniolan Spindalis**, **Greater Antillean Bullfinch**, **Bananaquit**, and a number of wood warblers such as **Black-and-white Warbler**, **American Redstart**, **Cape May Warbler**, and **Black-throated Blue Warbler**. A grove of pine trees at the top of the hill delivered a few of the nomadic **Hispaniolan Crossbills** along with a number of **Pine Warblers** before we began to make our way back down.

The return trip was much quieter, but we did better our views of **Hispaniolan Pewee**, **Rufous-throated Solitaire**, **Antillean Siskin**, and, surprisingly, **La Selle Thrush** – we found a single bird feeding on some fruit high up in a tree and enjoyed great views. One bird had been taunting us all morning with its repetitive call ringing more or less constantly, but, try as we might, we just

couldn't lay eyes on it – **Antillean Euphonia**. We hoped that this would change when we heard another individual close by once we arrived at our car, but it too went unseen.



*The skulking **Rufous-throated Solitaire** perched in the open for a short while.*

The track back down was on the quiet side, but we did find the rare **Golden Swallow** flitting through a clearing, along with **Sharp-shinned Hawk**, **Stolid Flycatcher**, **Vervain Hummingbird**, and some of the introduced **Olive-throated Parakeets**.

Once we reached the drier woodland lower down, near Puerto Escondido, we slowly worked this area for a few different species. First there was a **Northern Potoo** Rafael inexplicably saw perched on a tree, which was followed by **Flat-billed Vireo**, which fortunately didn't prove too difficult to find, and a pair showed well, before we hit the jackpot with the rare **Bay-breasted Cuckoo**. We had been trying for a while and had followed a number of the similar **Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoos** before eventually finding one that was just a bit different. Although the bird kept to the thicker areas we enjoyed some great views of it as it slowly moved around, creeping along the branches. Last was **Hispaniolan Oriole**, which took a little while to find as well, but a fruiting tree produced the goods. **Killdeer**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Merlin**, and **Yellow-faced Grassquit** were added as we went through the village back to Villa Barrancolí for a late lunch.

We headed onto the Rabo de Gato trail for the afternoon period, which saw us add a few more species. The prized **White-fronted Quail-Dove** was our first target, and, after patiently scanning the forest floor, we found a confiding individual. **Antillean Euphonia** followed, and this time we were fortunately able to get eyes on this species as it moved around the high canopy. Some other species seen here included **Limpkin**, **Scaly-naped Pigeon**, **White-necked Crow**, **Hispaniolan Amazon**, **Hispaniolan Parakeet**, and **Ovenbird**.

After dark a night walk produced a vocal **Least Poorwill**, but, try as I might, I was unable to lay eyes on the bird.



The special White-fronted Quail-Dove showed well.

Day 4, 24th October 2017. Villa Barrancolí to Los Patos

I began the morning with another walk along the Rabo de Gato trail. It was a good morning, with numbers of **Plain Pigeons** perching atop the canopy, while both **Broad-billed** and **Narrow-billed Todies** kept lower down in the thicket. **Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo**, **Antillean Piculet**, **Antillean Euphonia**, and **Greater Antillean Grackle** all worked the scrubby edges, while noisy **Hispaniolan Amazons** regularly flew overhead. **Limpkin** and **Green Heron** worked the river, with a **Stolid Flycatcher** keeping watch from an exposed perch.

Following a good breakfast I set off for the southern coastline of the Pedernales Province. The drive was pretty quick, and a brief stop at Lago de Oviedo delivered **American Flamingo** and **Roseate Spoonbill**, although they remained distant, before I arrived at Cabo Rojo for more wetland/coastal birding.

The birding here was excellent, and scanning in between the various tidal lagoons, brackish ponds, and the ocean delivered **Blue-winged Teal**, **Northern Shoveler**, **American Wigeon**, much closer views of **American Flamingo**, **American White Ibis**, **Great, Reddish**, and **Snowy Egrets**, **Tricolored Heron**, **Least Bittern**, **Brown Pelican**, numbers of **Brown Boobies**, **Western Osprey**, **Black-necked Stilt**, **Grey Plover**, **Stilt Sandpiper**, **Lesser Yellowlegs**, and **Royal Tern**. **Grey Kingbirds** perched along the powerlines together with **American Kestrel** and **Merlin**, while **Barn** and **Cave Swallows** flitted overhead and a brilliant **Mangrove Warbler** kept to a stand of bushes.

The Alcoa Road was next on the cards, although I was unable to access the upper reaches due to the road deteriorating. So I had to make do with **Smooth-billed Ani** and **Peregrine Falcon**, hoping to run into Hispaniolan Palm Crow at a later stage.

The rest of the afternoon saw me make my way back to the coast to Los Patos, where I spent the night.



A stately American Flamingo

Day 5, 25th October 2017. Los Patos to Sabana de la Mar

I started early to make my way toward Cachote, where the principal target would be Eastern Chat-Tanager. However, both of the entry roads were inaccessible and I had to depart the area empty-handed. I cut my losses and decided to rather use the extra time around Los Haitises National Park searching for the critically endangered Ridgway's Hawk.

Following a long drive across the country I arrived in the mid-afternoon at Sabana de la Mar, adding **Red-tailed Hawk**, **White-collared Swift**, and the introduced **Scaly-breasted Munia** en-route. A quick search along the beachfront delivered many **Magnificent Frigatebirds** along with **Western Osprey**, **Royal**, **Cabot's**, and **Common Terns**, and **Killdeer** before I headed to the nearby Caño Hondo Hotel.

After checking in I met the local guide, Juan, and we headed out in search of the prized special of the area, **Ridgway's Hawk**. We had just begun when we heard a loud raptor call, and Juan immediately confirmed that this was our target. We didn't have to go far before we found this great bird perched in the upper strata and enjoyed virtually point-blank views of it for around ten minutes, seeing it from every angle before it took off. Raptors can be very tricky to find at the best of times, and it was with much relief that we found this species so quickly and had such incredible, spectacular views.

With a big load off we explored the wet trails around the hotel for the rest of the afternoon and enjoyed the likes of **Plain Pigeon**, **Smooth-billed Ani**, **Antillean Mango**, **Vervain Hummingbird**, **Broad-billed Tody**, **Antillean Piculet**, **Hispaniolan Woodpecker**, **Hispaniolan Pewee**, numbers of **White-necked Crows**, **Palmchat**, **Antillean Euphonia**, **Black-crowned Tanager**, **Greater Antillean Grackle**, and **Blackpoll Warbler**.

Following a good dinner we headed out to search for **Ashy-faced Owl**. We searched a number of different spots over the next few hours but were left frustrated, hearing the bird many times but just not being able to see it. Eventually we conceded defeat and called it a night.



*We had prolonged views of the prized **Ridgway's Hawk**.*

Day 6, 26th Oct 2017. Sabana de la Mar to Santo Domingo

I met Juan early in the morning, and we set off to explore a few more trails around the hotel. It was a lively morning, and although we found many of the same species we had seen yesterday, we enjoyed good sightings throughout. Some of the rivers and ponds held **Green Heron, Great Egret, Little Blue Heron, Limpkin, and Northern Waterthrush**, while the thicker, taller vegetation surrounding the rivers and coating the hillsides produced **Ruddy Quail-Dove, Mangrove Cuckoo, Antillean Piculet, Black-whiskered Vireo, Black-crowned Tanager, American Redstart, and Northern Parula**. The more-open areas held **Common Ground Dove, White-winged Dove, Smooth-billed Ani, Grey Kingbird, Stolid Flycatcher, White-necked Crow, Palmchat, and Greater Antillean Grackle**. We also enjoyed a steady stream of birds overhead, including **Turkey Vulture, American Kestrel, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon**.

We returned back for breakfast, and afterwards I checked out and made my way back to Santo Domingo, bringing the scouting tour to an end.

Overall this was a highly successful scouting trip, not only in terms of enjoying excellent birding throughout in a suboptimal period of the year and finding all but two of the country's Hispaniola endemics with an additional two being heard only, but also in terms of the logistics in setting up future trips to this fantastic country. I, for one, cannot wait to return!



*The national bird of the Dominican Republic, **Palmchat***

Bird List - Following IOC (8.2)

Birds 'heard only' are marked with (H) after the common name, all other species were seen.

The following notation after species names is used to show conservation status following BirdLife International: CE = Critically Endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened. Hispaniola endemics are bolded.

Common name	Scientific name
Ducks, Geese and Swans (Anatidae)	
West Indian Whistling Duck - VU	<i>Dendrocygna arborea</i>
Blue-winged Teal	<i>Spatula discors</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>
Flamingos (Phoenicopteridae)	
American Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopus ruber</i>
Ibises, Spoonbills (Threskiornithidae)	
American White Ibis	<i>Eudocimus albus</i>
Roseate Spoonbill	<i>Platalea ajaja</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Herons, Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Least Bittern	<i>Ixobrychus exilis</i>
Yellow-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nyctanassa violacea</i>
Green Heron	<i>Butorides virescens</i>
Western Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Reddish Egret - NT	<i>Egretta rufescens</i>
Tricolored Heron	<i>Egretta tricolor</i>
Little Blue Heron	<i>Egretta caerulea</i>
Snowy Egret	<i>Egretta thula</i>
Pelicans (Pelecanidae)	
Brown Pelican	<i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>
Frigatebirds (Fregatidae)	
Magnificent Frigatebird	<i>Fregata magnificens</i>
Gannets, Boobies (Sulidae)	
Brown Booby	<i>Sula leucogaster</i>
New World Vultures (Cathartidae)	
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>
Ospreys (Pandionidae)	
Western Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
Kites, Hawks and Eagles (Accipitridae)	
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>
Ridgway's Hawk - CR	<i>Buteo ridgwayi</i>
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>
Rails, Crakes and Coots (Rallidae)	
Common Gallinule	<i>Gallinula galeata</i>
American Coot	<i>Fulica americana</i>
Limpkin (Aramidae)	
Limpkin	<i>Aramus guarauna</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Stilts, Avocets (Recurvirostridae)	
Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Plovers (Charadriidae)	
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>
Sandpipers, Snipes (Scolopacidae)	
Stilt Sandpiper	<i>Calidris himantopus</i>
Solitary Sandpiper	<i>Tringa solitaria</i>
Lesser Yellowlegs	<i>Tringa flavipes</i>
Gulls, Terns and Skimmers (Laridae)	
Royal Tern	<i>Thalasseus maximus</i>
Cabot's Tern	<i>Thalasseus acutiflavus</i>
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Pigeons, Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>
Scaly-naped Pigeon	<i>Patagioenas squamosa</i>
Plain Pigeon - NT	<i>Patagioenas inornata</i>
Common Ground Dove	<i>Columbina passerina</i>
Ruddy Quail-Dove	<i>Geotrygon montana</i>
White-fronted Quail-Dove - EN	<i>Geotrygon leucometopia</i>
Key West Quail-Dove (H)	<i>Geotrygon chrysia</i>
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaida macroura</i>
White-winged Dove	<i>Zenaida asiatica</i>
Cuckoos (Cuculidae)	
Smooth-billed Ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>
Mangrove Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus minor</i>
Bay-breasted Cuckoo - EN	<i>Coccyzus ruficularis</i>
Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus longirostris</i>
Barn Owls (Tytonidae)	
Ashy-faced Owl (H)	<i>Tyto glaucops</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	

Common name	Scientific name
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>
Potoos (Nyctibiidae)	
Northern Potoo	<i>Nyctibius jamaicensis</i>
Nightjars (Caprimulgidae)	
Least Poorwill (H) - NT	<i>Siphonorhis brewsteri</i>
Hispaniolan Nightjar	<i>Antrostomus ekmani</i>
Swifts (Apodidae)	
White-collared Swift	<i>Streptoprocne zonaris</i>
Antillean Palm Swift	<i>Tachornis phoenicobia</i>
Hummingbirds (Trochilidae)	
Antillean Mango	<i>Anthracothorax dominicus</i>
Hispaniolan Emerald	<i>Chlorostilbon swainsonii</i>
Vervain Hummingbird	<i>Mellisuga minima</i>
Trogons (Trogonidae)	
Hispaniolan Trogon - NT	<i>Priotelus roseigaster</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>
Todies (Todidae)	
Broad-billed Tody	<i>Todus subulatus</i>
Narrow-billed Tody	<i>Todus angustirostris</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Antillean Piculet	<i>Nesocittes micromegas</i>
Hispaniolan Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes striatus</i>
Caracaras, Falcons (Falconidae)	
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
African & New World Parrots (Psittacidae)	

Common name	Scientific name
Hispaniolan Amazon - VU	<i>Amazona ventralis</i>
Olive-throated Parakeet	<i>Eupsittula nana</i>
Hispaniolan Parakeet	<i>Psittacara chloropterus</i>
Tyrant Flycatchers, Calyptura (Tyrannidae)	
Greater Antillean Elaenia	<i>Elaenia fallax</i>
Hispaniolan Pewee	<i>Contopus hispaniolensis</i>
Grey Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus dominicensis</i>
Stolid Flycatcher	<i>Myiarchus stolidus</i>
Vireos, Greenlets & Shrike-babblers (Vireonidae)	
Flat-billed Vireo	<i>Vireo nanus</i>
Black-whiskered Vireo	<i>Vireo altiloquus</i>
Crows, Jays (Corvidae)	
White-necked Crow - VU	<i>Corvus leucognaphalus</i>
Palmchat (Dulidae)	
Palmchat	<i>Dulus dominicus</i>
Swallows, Martins (Hirundinidae)	
Golden Swallow - VU	<i>Tachycineta euchrysea</i>
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
Cave Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon fulva</i>
Mockingbirds, Thrashers (Mimidae)	
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>
Thrushes (Turdidae)	
Rufous-throated Solitaire	<i>Myadestes genibarbis</i>
La Selle Thrush - EN	<i>Turdus swalesi</i>
Red-legged Thrush	<i>Turdus plumbeus</i>
Old World Sparrows, Snowfinches (Passeridae)	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Waxbills, Munias and allies (Estrildidae)	
Scaly-breasted Munia	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Finches, Euphonias (Fringillidae)	
Hispaniolan Crossbill - EN	<i>Loxia megaplaga</i>
Antillean Siskin	<i>Spinus dominicensis</i>
Antillean Euphonia	<i>Euphonia musica</i>
Chat-Tanagers (Calyptophilidae)	
Western Chat-Tanager - VU	<i>Calyptophilus tertius</i>
Hispaniolan Tanagers (Phaenicophilidae)	
Black-crowned Tanager	<i>Phaenicophilus palmarum</i>
Green-tailed Warbler	<i>Microligea palustris</i>
White-winged Warbler - VU	<i>Xenoligea montana</i>
Spindalises (Spindalidae)	
Hispaniolan Spindalis	<i>Spindalis dominicensis</i>
Oropendolas, Orioles and Blackbirds (Icteridae)	
Hispaniolan Oriole	<i>Icterus dominicensis</i>
Greater Antillean Grackle	<i>Quiscalus niger</i>
New World Warblers (Parulidae)	
Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapilla</i>
Louisiana Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia motacilla</i>
Northern Waterthrush	<i>Parkesia noveboracensis</i>
Black-and-white Warbler	<i>Mniotilta varia</i>
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>
Cape May Warbler	<i>Setophaga tigrina</i>
Northern Parula	<i>Setophaga americana</i>
Mangrove Warbler	<i>Setophaga petechia</i>
Blackpoll Warbler	<i>Setophaga striata</i>
Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>
Palm Warbler	<i>Setophaga palmarum</i>
Pine Warbler	<i>Setophaga pinus</i>
Prairie Warbler	<i>Setophaga discolor</i>
Tanagers and allies (Thraupidae)	
Bananaquit	<i>Coereba flaveola</i>

Common name	Scientific name
Yellow-faced Grassquit	<i>Tiaris olivaceus</i>
Black-faced Grassquit	<i>Tiaris bicolor</i>
Greater Antillean Bullfinch	<i>Loxigilla violacea</i>

Total seen	112
Total heard only	3
Total recorded	115