ORNITOLOGIA NEOTROPICAL 23: 603–609, 2012

BOOK REVIEWS—RESEÑAS DE LIBROS—RESENHAS DE LIVROS

Edited by John G. Blake

(To whom books for review should be sent)

Ruta Barrancoli: A bird-finding guide to the Dominican Republic. — Steven C. Latta and Kate J. Wallace. 2012. Premier Printing Corporation, Warrensville Heights, Ohio, USA. Softcover, 241 pp. ISBN 978-0-615-62568-3. Costs $29.95.

Located on the island of Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles Archipelago, the Dominican Republic (DR) is the geographically second largest Caribbean nation. The country is not only a biodiversity hotspot, it's a big one. Most abundant and taxonomically diverse are the avifauna. From the endemic Narrow-billed Tody to the Neotropical migrant Bicknell's Thrush, the country supports a rich fauna of both residents and winter visitors (Latta *et al.* 2006, Latta 2012). The DR has only recently hit the radar of ornithologists and the birding community alike, however, despite being located just a 'stone's-throw' from Miami; the DR is in many regards an entirely different world. Slowly emerging from an era of dictatorship some forty years ago, Dominicans still battle political corruption, unemployment, nation-wide electrical shortages, and deep-rooted cultural issues with its neighbor to the west, Haiti. These factors have unfortunately been deterrents for the international community that has just begun to poke around and see what the 'true' DR possesses outside of the six-meter high walls that surround its many tourist resorts. And what are they seeing? Birds.

With "Ruta Barrancoli: A bird-finding guide to the Dominican Republic" (hereafter shortened to Ruta Barrancoli), authors Steven C. Latta and Kate J. Wallace are doing exactly what needs to be done. They are using birds to show the world that the DR is open for viewing – and there is a lot to see. In 2006, Latta and co-authors created "Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti," an extensive bird guide that almost seven years later continues to stand as the strongest compilation of information on the bird species of Hispaniola. Now, Latta and Wallace have complimented that work with knowledge on how to navigate the Dominican Republic in pursuit of the more than 300 bird species it has to offer.

Before the reader gets into the 'meat' of the book, that is the content aimed specifically at getting you to the right spots to find your target species, the authors have added nearly 40 pages of background information. To some this may seem excessive, but I find it priceless and perhaps even leaning towards minimalism. In order to find many of the more rare birds in the Dominican Republic, visitors must be a bit on the adventurous side. They must, therefore, be prepared. I am a strong advocate that visitors today, including both scientists and naturalists, can be expected to serve to some degree as ambassadors. This translates into knowing how to communicate, behave, and respect foreign

cultures in which we must remember that we are guests. For those reasons, I cannot emphasize how critical (though sometimes redundant between parallel works of literature) a "Things to know before you go" section can be. As they go on to mention however, this book must be coupled with a country guide, such as Lonely Planet, in order to fill in the logistical gaps. I am curious as to how the mission of Ruta Barrancoli could be meshed with the goals of the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds (SCSCB) Birding Trail project (http://www.caribbeanbirdingtrail.org/). Both are ultimately focused on broadcasting a trail that connects people with birds. This book should act as a model for other Caribbean Islands, making every effort to continue establishing the connectivity of islands within the archipelago for migratory birds in order to better protect the system in its entirety.

Latta and Wallace do a fine job of highlighting the ethics of birding but are meager in their "Reporting Bird Sightings" (page 23) component. We are just beginning to realize the tremendous power of eBird, an enormous database of bird sightings generated by the public that is re-shaping modern understanding of bird distributions as well as citizen science. I encourage the authors to dedicate an entire page to this, including graphics, while reinstating the fundamental message for birders to log what they see later on in the book as well. Leafing onwards, the reader comes across a very thorough, 14-page tribute to the country's endemic birds. Birders are often tuned-in and attracted to birds that they cannot see anywhere else in the world, and this section brings all of those species conveniently together in a checklist fashion accompanied by beautiful color plates. 'Show-casing' the endemic species helps in establishing what makes the country unique which in turn can generate a dimension of local pride and stewardship while additionally raising general awareness for those birds. On pages 36–47 are a series of tables that neatly outline each bird species and where they can be found in respect to specific site and region codes depicted on an earlier (page 9) hand-drawn map. Ruta Barrancoli is meant, judging by the use of layman's terms and overall style, to be understood by even the most novice birdwatcher, and though simple enough to deduce, these tables could use a brief explanation – most pressing being the differentiation between Targeted (T) and Probable (X) occurrences. These pages are clean and neat with solid colored backgrounds that do not distract the reader from the plethora of key information on each page.

To simplify the structure of their proposed birding trail, the authors have broken down the Dominican Republic into five distinct geographical regions (denoted A through E) with 44 specific sites. These sites represent the best locations for birding and are explained in fantastic detail. Latta and Wallace have compiled what can be easily called 'priceless' insider information on when, where, and why to bird a specific locale while additionally providing up-to-date details on reserve hours and costs. This fountain of information undoubtedly stems from years of personal observation, intricate documentation, and attention to detail. The site-by-site information will not take away from the adventure of exploring and birding the Dominican Republic in the slightest, but rather make it efficient and achievable.

The first thing that stands out to me is the formatting – it's fun. The use of colors and fonts keeps the reader's attention while the torn notebook page graphics do a nice job of metaphorically reminding us to keep tabs on what we are seeing (while also perhaps hinting at the unorthodox record-keeping of the modern-day, enthusiastically distracted birder). The authors have made a solid first-stab at including detailed, hand-drawn maps

that ameliorate what can often be the extremely overwhelming, ill-informed role of the navigator. The maps are not cluttered and offer sufficient open space on which the reader can write in additional points of reference. On that note, the more maps the better. Once you leave the DR's main highways, you need to have your game-face on. I encourage Latta and Wallace to think about including a large pull-out map (or five regionally specific maps) that overlay their 44 birding sites onto a true satellite image of the country – especially in predicting that more and more travelers will be referencing a handheld GPS image of some kind. The photographs are equally important as they often get the reader excited (with a quick glimpse) of what they might be able to see. I suggest that future editions should label every photo of a bird with at least its common name; this is hit-and-miss throughout the book. Concerning the overall page design, there is only one feature that is of particular worry: the opening page of each site description has an artistic background consisting of a subdued map fragment that often-times does not completely correlate with the location being discussed. This can be misleading and distracting and could be swapped for a creative outline of a bird commonly found at that site.

After a multifaceted introduction and approximately 145 pages of insight and advice from two of the most resourceful birders in the Dominican Republic, experienced birders or ornithologists find themselves smiling at what is all-too-often mismanaged or forgotten in bird guides outside of the United States – a comprehensive checklist of the country's birds that includes the English common name *and* the local common name (in this case Spanish) both of which are conveniently slotted together and accompanied by the scientific name and species status. I am confident that readers will quickly notice, thanks to well-planned and organized pages such as this, how little flipping they must do in order to find the information they are looking for in this book.

"Ruta Barrancoli: A bird-finding guide to the Dominican Republic" is an attractive, light-weight guide that will appropriately accompany its counterpart, "Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti," to the most remote regions of the country. This revolutionary guide will open the doors to the Dominican Republic for birders from around the world, meanwhile prompting those who have already spent seasons wandering Jaragua National Park or the Cordillera Central in pursuit of some endemic to exclaim, "*Where was this guide 10 years ago!*", while frantically trying to book a red-eye flight to Santo Domingo.

— C. Justin Proctor, Department of Natural Resources at Cornell Univ., Ithaca, New York 14853, USA. *E-mail*: cjp252@cornell.edu

REFERENCES

Latta, S. C. 2012. Avian research in the Caribbean: past contributions and current priorities. J. Field Ornithol. 83: 107–121.

Latta, S., C. Rimmer, A. Keith, J. Wiley, H. Raffaele, K. McFarland, & E. Fernandez. 2006. Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.

Birds of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire. — Bart de Boer, Eric Newton, and Robin Restall. 2011. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. Hardcover, 176 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-15336-0. Costs $27.95.

The neighboring islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire are part of the Netherlands Antilles situated in the southern Caribbean, just north of Venezuela. The islands arose from uplifting of submerged volcanic formations that resulted from the collision of the Caribbean and South American tectonic plates during the Pleistocene. These islands were never connected via land bridges to the continent, although they are sufficiently near the continent (Aruba, 30 km; Curaçao, 66 km; Bonaire, 88 km), that for zoogeographic purposes they are considered as continental islands, by some. The islands are relatively small (Aruba, 190 km^2; Bonaire, 288 km^2; Curaçao, 444 km^2) and of low stature (i.e., maximum elevation above sea level for Aruba, 188 m; Bonaire, 240 m; Curaçao, 377 m), and partly as a consequence, they have a semi-arid climate with distinct wet and dry seasons, the severity and timing of which vary among years. The predominate native vegetation is comprised of a mix of cactus and thorn-scrub, which varies in stature with exposure to the northeast trade winds, and which in many areas has been severely degraded as a result of various agricultural and industrial practices. Lagoons, some fringed with mangroves, are scattered around the islands; salinity of lagoons is variable, as is the seasonal presence of water. The recent establishment of a freshwater sewage lagoon has further increased habitat diversity on Aruba.

Given their proximity to mainland South America and limited topographic relief, it should not be surprising that no bird species are unique to these islands, although approximately 22 subspecies or races, many characterized by pale coloration, are largely confined to one or more of the islands. Proximity to the mainland accounts for the predominance of South American birds in the resident terrestrial avifauna though some insular Caribbean species are present, with their representation increasing from Aruba to Bonaire. Because of the predominance of South American species, the three islands are excluded from the West Indian faunal region and as a result many of the species typical of these islands are excluded from major field guides to West Indian birds. Therefore, there has been a need for a field guide for these islands, which was filled for many years by Voous (1983). At the time of Voous's classic work, the three islands hosted 236 species of which 63 species bred, 111 were Nearctic-Neotropical migrants, 43 species visited from South America, and 36 species were seabirds. More recently, as summarized in the checklist in the "Birds of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire," the total for the three islands has increased to 286 species, due primarily to an increased tally of vagrant species, undoubtedly due to more birding activity, and an increase in naturalized exotic bird species (psittacines and finches).

"Birds of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire" begins with a very brief introduction to the geology, geography, climate, history, and current political status of the islands. A section on the flora and fauna provides descriptions of some of the more conspicuous plants and animals of these islands. Avifauna is briefly described with much of the discussion based on observations of Hartert (1893), but with no mention of more recent analyses by Voous and others. A section on how to use the book includes definitions of terms used in the guide as well as three detailed figures depicting various aspects of bird topography. A useful section on birding sites is provided for each island and includes descriptions of the sites and some of their notable bird species. Important bird areas and Ramsar sites are noted in the text as well as in individual maps

for each island, which show the locations of the birding sites. The conservation section notes that only two resident species in the islands are listed in the IUCN Red List although the local subspecies of two owl species are of conservation concern. In the section on local names, the authors describe the difficulties and challenges of providing local names for birds in Papiamento, the creol language used on the three islands. The authors should be congratulated for providing some of the local bird names, despite the fact that the Papiamento language has two official spellings and the language itself represents a hybrid derived from pidgin Portugues influenced by a mix of Arwak, Spanish, Dutch, French, English, and several African languages. The reference to local names is useful for visiting birders when they converse with local residents, but more importantly, use of local names is invaluable for conservation efforts, which require "ownership" of the avifauna by the island residents. Overall, however, the introductory sections will be disappointing to visitors wanting more background on the avifauna and its ecology and evolution in these islands.

The species accounts are arranged in the standard format of a modern identification guide with a page providing the description and the adjoining page illustrating the described species. Each species account provides English, Dutch, and scientific name as well as local name from each of the islands, where known. Brief descriptions of key field marks are provided for each species with distinguishing traits noted in bold lettering. Habitat and status for each species is also provided in the accounts. Range maps are not provided for the islands, but given their relatively small size this is not likely to be a problem for most species. Naturalized exotic species are described in the text and illustrated; a list (without illustrations) is provided for exotics that occasionally escape, but for which evidence of successful breeding in the wild has not been established.

Each of the 286 species known from the islands are described and illustrated in 71 color plates and almost 1,000 illustrations. Robin Restall did all of the illustrations, many of which were taken from Restall *et al.* (2007) or Kenefick *et al.* (2001). For sexually dichromatic species, both sexes are shown, and the various plumages that differ by age and/or season are also illustrated for those species showing such variation. The degree of plumage variation illustrated is sometimes extensive as evident in the plate of the frigatebirds (plate 9) and plates of migrant warblers. For most migrants, only those plumages that occur when a migrant is present in the islands are depicted, and therefore alternate plumages for some are not shown, e.g., male Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*) and Blue Grosbeak (*P. caerulea*). Many species are shown in both non-flight postures and in flight (e.g., raptors, some shorebirds, gulls and terns, waterfowl, nightjars, and swallows) whereas pelagic species are shown only in flight and most other groups are shown only in standing or perched positions. A nice addition is the inclusion of illustrations of the different subspecies for those species in which differences are distinguishable by plumage in the field. Overall, the quality and accuracy of most plates are good and based on my own field experience identifying birds on these islands observers should have little trouble using the illustrations to identify most birds found in these islands. However, for migrants, including some shorebirds and thrushes, which are not well illustrated in the plates, observers would be wise to refer to a North American field guide to ensure accurate identification.

The illustrations in "Birds of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire" represent a vast improvement over those depicted in Voous (1983). In this earlier book, some of the illustrations

were of poor quality and many species were not illustrated. Nonetheless, bird watchers may wish to consult Voous (1983) for more detailed descriptions of plumages and natural history, much of the latter of which was distilled from the Dutch literature and previously unavailable in English. Although, Voous (1983) is dated (but not out of print) it still provides good introductory information on the islands and their avifauna, and for many breeding species, some of the most detailed summaries of diet, breeding behavior, and habits published for birds on any Caribbean island. In contrast, the "Birds of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire" provides an up-to-date compact complete identification guide that all bird watchers will want to have with them when in the field on these islands.

— Joseph M. Wunderle, Jr., International Institute of Tropical Forestry, USDA Forest Service, Sabana Field Research Station, HC 02 Box 6205, Luquillo, Puerto Rico 00773, USA. *E-mail*: jmwunderle@gmail.com

REFERENCES

Hartert, E. 1893. On the birds of the islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire. Ibis 5: 289–338.

Kenefick, M., R. L. Restall, & F. Hayes. 2001. Birds of Trinidad and Tobago, 2nd ed. Chistopher Helm Press, London, UK.

Restall, R., C. Rodner, & M. Lentino. 2007. Birds of Northern South America, Yale Univ. Press, New Haven, Connecticut, USA.

Voous, K. H. 1983. Birds of the Netherlands Antilles, 2nd ed. Walburg Press, Zutphen, The Netherlands.