

WINGING IT: DISCOVERING THE CARIBBEAN BIRDING TRAIL

PART 2: DOMINICA — THE RARE PARROTS' PARADISE

By Robbie Lisa Freeman



With the number of breeding adults estimated now to be below 50 pairs, the Imperial (Sisserou) Parrot is listed as Endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. Hurricanes, as well as natural and man-made habitat loss, the black market capture and sale of birds, and a low reproduction rate are among the issues that threaten survival of these great birds. | Photo by Stephen Durand.

The morning sky was gray and the clouds thick with the threat of more rain. What had started out earlier as light showers had turned into a steady downpour as we sat perched on a wet wooden bench beneath a camouflage poncho, expertly strung up as a makeshift tarp by our bird guide. You could tell “Dr. Birdy” had done this before. As one of the top bird guides on the small island of Dominica, Bertrand Jno Baptiste, nicknamed “Dr. Birdy”, was attempting to show my husband and me the national treasure of Dominica, the Imperial Parrot (*Amazona imperialis*), locally called the Sisserou. One of only two endemic birds of the island nation, the Sisserou had eluded many a birder, we knew. But we were hopeful. And patient. And we had flown 3,741 miles to see it. So, of course we would be rewarded, we reasoned.

Dr. Birdy’s scope was strategically situated, pointing out over a ravine toward a mountain of trees in the foothills of Morne Diablotin, where the shy Sisserou is known to flock, forage, and nest. In the right conditions, the parrots would swoop up from the treetops, regaling ecstatic birders with

their raucous squawks. In. The. *Right*. Conditions. Those conditions being a sunny, windless early morning. It was not sunny. It was not windless. It was raining... harder now.

Still, though the sky may have been charged with negative ions, our hearts were charged with hope. Hope is a good thing to have as a birder. It’s what draws you out of bed before dawn, guides you over far distances, and urges you along on breathlessly high, difficult switchback trails, or through dense, thorny scrub. And so, we sat—on our wet wooden bench—getting up now and then to walk to the railing overlooking the ravine, binoculars ready. Occasionally a parrot call pierced the downpour. We laughed about putting a time clock on the birds. Earlier, along the trail, our guide had shown us a Blue-headed Hummingbird that would religiously appear and perch on a specific shrub every six minutes. It’s good when a bird is that punctual. But as any birder knows, nature is mostly unpredictable. And today was no exception. The weather continued to degrade in a way that would likely discourage any Sisserou Parrots from leaving the safety of the trees. So, we took the time to learn more about the endangered parrots: how their populations were fairing, how the hurricanes had impacted them, how their future looked.

Dr. Birdy worked for many years as a Forestry Officer with the Dominica Forestry, Wildlife and Parks Division (FWD) of the Ministry of Agriculture. There he became acquainted with the island’s migrating and breeding bird species. He conducted field surveys, taxonomy, blood sampling and other research. He also learned about the decades of conservation efforts around the Imperial Parrot and the only other endemic bird of Dominica, the Red-necked Parrot (*Amazona arausiaca*), locally known as the Jaco. Both rare birds are considered model examples demonstrating how conservation stewardship can reap tremendous rewards for maintaining wild bird biodiversity. However, it is the Imperial Parrot that holds a very special place in the heart of Dominicans and the conservation world. As the largest of 27 Amazon species of parrot worldwide, the Imperial Parrot is only found in the wild on Dominica, primarily in the Morne Diablotin and Morne Trois Pitons National Parks. That alone makes it a jewel to conservationists. But equally important: this bird is a testimony to resiliency. In 1979, when the category 4 hurricane, Hurricane David, hit Dominica, it devastated the Imperial Parrot population. Only about 50 individual birds survived, according to information provided by Paul Reillo, Ph.D., president of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF) and director of the Tropical Conservation Institute at Florida International University. This prompted the launch of a new parrot program in 1980 involving the FWD and the World



The Jaco or Red-necked Parrot had increased in numbers to more than 1200 birds in 2003, but after Hurricane Maria numbers have been estimated to be much smaller. | Photo by P. Reillo, RSCF, TCI/FIU

Wildlife Fund (WWF), with the goal of assessing the impact of David on island wildlife and exploring new conservation efforts.

In 1996, the RSCF initiated the Wildlife Conservation Partnership with FWD to provide equipment to assist in the recovery of the species. Over the years, the program achieved critical conservation milestones, including the creation of Morne Diablotin National Park, and new discoveries about the parrots' ecologies, behavior, reproduction and recovery potential.

"Wild parrot conservation efforts following Hurricane David proved to be very effective, especially when used in tandem with increased monitoring, public education, programs to ease agriculture and parrot conflicts, protective legislation and parks zoning," said Lisa Sorenson, Ph.D., executive director of BirdsCaribbean, an international network committed to conserving birds of the Caribbean. "As a result of these efforts, the numbers of Imperial Parrots, prior to Hurricane Maria, had grown to roughly 400-450, and the Jaco Parrot's number had risen to about 1200."

So it was heart-stopping for many conservationists around the globe when Hurricane Maria, a category 5 hurricane, hit Dominica in September of 2017. "It was the

worst hurricane I have experienced as an adult," said Dr. Birdy. "News reported surface winds of 160 MPH. Its force continued for 8 hours. Afterwards, there was not one leaf on these forest trees," he said, gesturing around us.

With bird habitats decimated, conservation groups again rallied to come to the aid of Dominica's parrots. According to Sorenson, BirdsCaribbean, the RSCF, and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) worked with Dominica's FWD, sending surveyors, bird feeders, seed, tools, and field equipment to assist in the recovery of the species. Injured birds were captured and taken to a rehabilitation aviary operated by the FWD, with the goal of treating and releasing them back into the wild.

Conservationists who had previously witnessed the parrots' resilience and recovery in the wild were confident that recovery could happen again. So, it took experts by surprise when on March 17th, 2018 — six months after Maria — sources reported that two Sisserou Parrots and ten Jaco Parrots at the aviary had been exported from Dominica to a captive breeding facility in Germany, under the guise of an emergency action for species protection.

After learning of the export, thirteen international conservation organizations joined together to express alarm in a letter to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). That controversy still roils today, as conservation groups continue to press for answers regarding the justification for the export and to lament the loss of birds that could have continued to breed in the wild, helping to grow the fragile population of Imperial Parrots.

"When safety net captive populations for Caribbean Amazon Parrots are warranted, they can and should be accomplished in their natural ecosystems within a network of officially protected areas," said Dr. Reillo in a recent article in *Hemisphere* magazine. "Exporting wild birds to distant foreign aviaries under a pretense of saving species paralyzes ongoing conservation successes that take generations to achieve."

But there is some good news since Maria. The forests are growing back. And the Jaco Parrot seems on its way to a solid recovery, according to Dr. Birdy. "Hurricanes can create new habitats for parrots," he said. "The parrots have more nesting holes in dead trees. They find new sources of food in the lower mountain elevations. And once the forests regenerate, parrots can return to their homes. Today, I see bigger flocks of the Jaco Parrot than I have ever seen in my career as a birder," he told us as we returned to the entrance of the Syndicate Nature Trail. As if to put an exclamation point on his statement, we were greeted there by a dozen or so garrulous Jaco Parrots, who clucked to us from the treetops, trying to soothe our disappointment at not seeing their reclusive relatives. And soothe us they did, with their display of vivid colors: the green wings and back, red throat, bluish head and yellow tail feathers. Seeing their numbers, we felt encouraged

for the Jaco Parrot. As for the elusive Sisserou, we would have to continue hoping as we headed south to hike the only other known nesting area of the parrot, the Morne Trois Pitons National Park.

Southern Dominica

Morne Trois Pitons National Park dominates the southern half of Dominica. In 1975, it was the first park in the Caribbean to be designated a nature preserve — and with good reason. Within its boundaries are unspoiled mountain peaks, waterfalls, tropical forests, and lakes, many accessible via easy treks, while others, like the Valley of Desolation, you'd hike only on a dare. We chose the Emerald Pool as our first hike and spotted one of Dominica's three known Accipitridae, the Broad-winged Hawk. It was the first raptor we had seen during our two weeks in the Caribbean. Though many migrate during the winter from North America, some subspecies have become year-round residents in the Caribbean.

A day later, a hike to Trafalgar Falls rewarded us not only with its beautiful twin falls, but with a sighting of the Caribbean Elaenia, a small flycatcher with a shrill whistle, found only in Puerto Rico and the Lesser Antilles Islands. According to Dominica's Forestry Division, 65 species of birds have been found to breed only on Dominica and a few other surrounding Caribbean Islands. For example, the Blue-headed Hummingbird is found only on Dominica and Martinique, while the Plumbeous Warbler is endemic only to Dominica, Guadeloupe and Marie Gallante islands. As we mapped our path for the next few days, focusing primarily on waterfall hikes in the foothills of Morne Trois Pitons, we kept eyes and ears tuned to sight any of these special Caribbean birds.



The Broad-winged Hawk lives in forests, preferring to spend its time beneath canopied trees. Five subspecies are endemic to the Caribbean and do not migrate. | Photo by P. Reillo, RSCF, TCI/FIU



The Blue-headed Hummingbird is found only on Dominica and Martinique. The male typically displays colors of iridescent blues and greens that catch the light on bright days. | Photo by P. Reillo, RSCF, TCI/FIU



The Gray Kingbird, or Pitirre, is a flycatcher found widely in the Caribbean. It has a much larger bill than North America's Eastern Kingbird. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman



The Caribbean Elaenia is an alert flycatcher found in woodlands or semi-open areas of brush and trees. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman



Bananaquits, small nectivores abundant throughout the West Indies, Mexico and beyond, have curved beaks, a bright yellow chest, charcoal-black head, wings and tail, and a wide white eye stripe. | Photo By Robbie Lisa Freeman

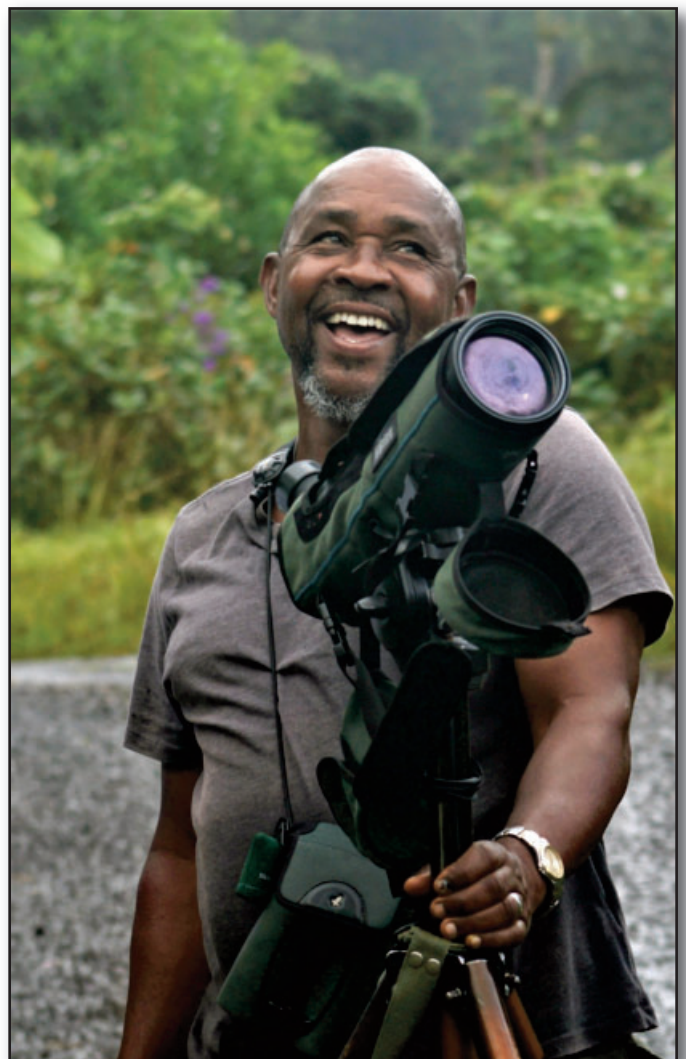
Our final hike was a rigorous trek to Middleham Falls, one of the highest waterfalls in Dominica. While birds whistled and called all around us, our attention became focused on clambering over damp, slippery boulders and making sure we followed the right path, often unseeable beyond the tricky mountain stream crossings. Ninety minutes after setting out, we were greeted by a magnificent waterfall. We stood and soaked up its power and the beauty of the forest. Our adventure to Dominica was coming to a close. It was all over, it seemed, but the hike back. It had been a good trip. Would it have been better if we had sighted our Sisserou Parrot? Of course. But we couldn't complain. We were in paradise.

Thirty minutes into our return trek, as we topped a final boulder ending the steepest part of our uphill climb, we were stopped cold in our tracks. Above us, the unmistakable squawk of a Sisserou Parrot pierced the air and a large purplish-gray bird swooped over the treetops. We gawked, then grinned at each other. Nature is indeed unpredictable in so many ways.

This is the second in a series about the Caribbean Birding Trail. Stay tuned for the next story on St. Lucia in an upcoming issue.

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The islands of the Caribbean are home to 171 endemic species of birds. To learn more about these birds and how to support their conservation through bird and nature tourism, visit the websites of the nonprofit regional conservation organization BirdsCaribbean at BirdsCaribbean.org and CaribbeanBirdingTrail.org. Follow them on social media @BirdsCaribbean.



One of the foremost birding experts on Dominica, Bertrand Jno Baptiste, aka "Dr. Birdy", has been studying the endangered parrots of the island for more than 30 years. He can be reached at (767) 245-4768 or by email at: drbirdy58@gmail.com. | Photo by Robbie Lisa Freeman