

Caribbean BIRDWATCH

Expert advice to help you appreciate our region's beautiful birds. In this issue we focus on *Martinique*



White-breasted Thrasher

THIERRY LESALES

WHERE TO FIND IT: The species is endemic to St Lucia and Martinique, where it is a year-round resident. It lives only in tropical dry forest, and is restricted to a small peninsula in the northeast of Martinique – the Presqu'île de la Caravelle. For a good chance of spotting one, walk in the Caravelle Nature Reserve.

WHAT DOES IT EAT? It forages mainly on the ground, vigorously flipping over leaf litter in search of insects, small frogs and lizards. It also eats berries and fruit when in season.

BEHAVIOUR: It utilises cooperative breeding: many adult offspring help their parents raise new offspring (their siblings) rather than dispersing to breed on their own. These 'helper' birds participate in nest building, nestling feeding and nest defense.

GLOBAL STATUS: The species was thought to be extinct in Martinique in the mid-20th century. It has since been rediscovered, but there are fewer than 400 in Martinique (fewer than 2000 globally), and the species is classified as endangered. Destruction of its dry forest habitat has caused historic population decline. The main threat in Martinique is posed by introduced mongooses and rats that eat eggs and chicks.



JENNIFER MORTENSEN

BIRD OF THE ISSUE:

WHITE-BREASTED THRASHER (*Ramphocinclus brachyurus*)

HOW TO SPOT IT: Known locally as *moqueur gorge-blanche*, the White-breasted Thrasher is a handsome, medium-sized songbird identified by its stark white breast and sleek brown back. Though this plumage sets it apart, the Thrasher can be further distinguished by its long bill and legs, and the frequent drooping and flicking of its wings. It is often heard before it's seen, with its hoarse alarm call ('chek chek chek') seemingly ever-present in the forest.

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CARIBBEAN BIRDING TRAIL

TOP 3 HOTSPOTS: MARTINIQUE

From mountainous rainforests in the north to coral islets in the south, the diverse habitats in Martinique support more than 200 bird species. Specialities include the endemic *Martinique Oriole*, the near-endemic *Blue-headed Hummingbird*, *Grey Trembler*, and *White-breasted Thrasher*. Exploring this French island is a breeze thanks to well-marked trails and roadways.



Female Blue-headed Hummingbird

DAVID BELFAN

1 DOMAINE D'EMERAUDE: This regional natural park is on Route de la Trace (N3) south of the towering Mount Pelée. With nearly 4km of walking trails winding through lush rainforest, here you can expect to see the Martinique Oriole, Blue-headed Hummingbird, Rufous-throated Solitaire, Antillean Euphonia, Grey Trembler, Lesser Antillean Flycatcher and more. The park is open daily 9am-4pm.

2 CARAVELLE NATURE RESERVE: This reserve is on the Caravelle Peninsula on Martinique's north-east coast. Well-kept



Red-billed Tropicbird

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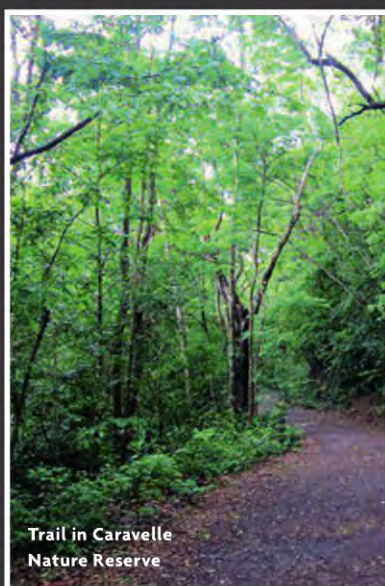


The active volcano Mount Pelée

DAVID BELFAN

trails near Château Dubuc and the lighthouse at the tip of the peninsula pass through tropical dry forest and skirt numerous beautiful beaches. On your visit, be on the lookout for dry forest birds such as the White-breasted Thrasher, Yellow Warbler, Ruddy Quail-Dove, Lesser Antillean Saltator, Mangrove Cuckoo, as well as seabirds such as the Magnificent Frigatebird soaring near the sea cliffs.

3 ISLETS OF SAINTE-ANNE: Lying off the southern tip of Martinique, these four coral limestone islets represent an important seabird nesting site. From May to July the islets shelter a colony of 15,000-plus seabirds including species such as Sooty Tern, Bridled Tern, Brown Noddy, Audubon's Shearwater, and Red-billed Tropicbird. Birding from a boat is the best option here as access to the islets is strictly regulated.



Trail in Caravelle Nature Reserve

JENNIFER MORTENSEN

Project watch TRACKING THE THRASHER

Despite being among the most-threatened birds in St Lucia and Martinique, it is not known whether White-breasted Thrashers travel between the two breeding populations. Movements of individuals have been tracked by fitting plastic bands with unique colour combinations to the birds' legs so that individuals can be identified. Of 400-plus birds banded since 2006, none has been tracked moving between islands. Researchers also measure gene exchange between populations. Understanding whether the two populations are connected is an important factor in predicting the fate of the species, and in developing conservation plans.



JENNIFER MORTENSEN

Banding White-breasted Thrashers allows individual identification but does not harm the birds

MY BEST birding moment



"In 2014, I spotted the **White-tailed Nightjar** of Martinique for the first time. At the end of a day at the Caravelle Peninsula I saw it fly over a barren area; when I got nearer, there was an egg. What joy to know that, in spite of the rats and mongooses in that place, this species goes on living there – and reproduces!"

DAVID BELFAN is President of Association Carouge (associationcarouge@hotmail.com), which works to preserve the fauna and flora of Martinique

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Yellow Warbler
THIERRY LESALES