

# First records of Little Egret, Green-winged Teal, Swallow-tailed Kite, Tennessee Warbler, and Red-breasted Blackbird from Aruba

## Background

The small islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao—the “ABC islands” as they are called locally—lie off the coast of northern Venezuela and constitute arguably the southernmost edge of the “West Indies,” though they are often excluded from ornithological accounts of the Caribbean Sea islands, as are Trinidad and Tobago to the east. Together with the Lesser Antillean islands of Sint Maarten, Saba, and Sint Eustatius (the “Leeward Islands”), the three ABC islands (or “Windward Islands”) comprised the Netherlands Antilles (Dutch Antilles) until January 1986, when Aruba became autonomous in domestic affairs, though still connected to the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Aruba is a semi-arid island of approximately 190 km<sup>2</sup> lying some 30 km off the Venezuelan coast. Rainfall averages about 51 cm annually, over half of which falls between October and January. The vegetation is primarily thorn-scrub and cactus.

Casey Beachell and I visited Aruba 23–30 March 2003 and observed birds in the vicinity of the Tierra del Sol Golf Course, Bubali Bird Sanctuary, and Spanish Lagoon. Bubali Bird Sanctuary and a lake at the Tierra del Sol Golf Course provide the only significant freshwater habitat on the island. Bubali was created in 1973 to handle sewage outflow from the resorts and hotels. The resultant marsh is about one km long and 0.5 km wide, with most of the area covered by cattails (*Typha* spp.); on the marsh's west shore, there is a line of broadleaf trees, with a canopy ranging

mostly from three to six m in height. The golf course lake is Y-shaped and, when full, about one km long and 0.25 km wide. This lake provides muddy edges and a small marsh. Some water is apparently always present, though the amount is highly dependent on recent rainfall and, perhaps, runoff from the golf course. At the northern tip of the lake is a small grove of trees that hosts a Snowy Egret (*Egretta thula*) rookery. The southwestern portion of Aruba has some mangrove swamps, the most prominent of which are along a one-km cut known as Spanish Lagoon.

During the last week of March 2003, Casey Beachell and I found five species of birds not previously recorded on Aruba, as well as six other bird species recorded five or fewer times there. First island records were established for Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*), Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca carolinensis*), Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanoides forficatus*), Tennessee Warbler (*Vermivora peregrina*), and Red-breasted Blackbird (*Sturnella militaris*). Northern Parula (*Parula americana*) had been found only once before on Aruba. Other notable birds included Aruba's third records of Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*), Southern Lapwing (*Vanelus chilensis*), Cape May Warbler (*Dendroica tigrina*), and Hooded Warbler (*Wilsonia citrina*), as well as a fourth record of Ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*). Videotape and extensive written documentation of these birds have been filed at the Zoological Museum of Amsterdam; more abbreviated accounts of these records are digested herein.

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## Little Egret

A Little Egret was first located at Tierra del Sol Golf Course on 25 March and was subsequently seen on 28 and 30 March. This bird had a full set of breeding plumes, but the lores were dark gray. It did not associate with any other birds, though it roosted near the Snowy Egret rookery (as did a number of other herons). There was no apparent interaction with any of the 19 young Snowy Egrets there.

The first Little Egret recorded in the Western Hemisphere was found at Barbados on 16 April 1954 (Bond 1966), followed by a second on 8 May 1954 in Newfoundland (Godfrey 1956). During the ensuing 25 years, only three more Little Egrets were found in the Western Hemisphere, with singles at Trinidad on 13 January 1957 (Downs 1959), Martinique on 6 October 1962 (Bond 1985), and Suriname on 3 June 1969 (Haverschmidt 1983). Sightings of this species became somewhat more regular in the 1980s, and breeding was noted at Barbados in 1994 (Massiah 1996, Mlodinow et al., in press); 12 to 20 nests are now

noted annually on Barbados, and there are more than 50 records from Trinidad and Tobago, most of which come from January to April (Hayes and White 2001, Mlodinow et al., in press). There are no records for Venezuela, Curaçao, or Bonaire (Hilty 2003, Reuter and Prins, in prep.).

### Northern Pintail

We found a male Northern Pintail at Tierra del Sol Golf Course on 23 March, which was still present 30 March. The two previous Aruba records are from 1997 and 2002, and there are also two records from Bonaire, one each from 1980 and 2001 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). This species is found regularly during winter south to Panama and the Greater Antilles (Madge and Burn 1988, Raffaele et al. 1998). There are three old records from Venezuela (Hilty 2003) and several old records from Colombia (Hilty and Brown 1986).

### Green-winged Teal

We first noted a male Green-winged Teal, of the North American race *carolinensis*, at Tierra del Sol Golf Course on 25 March. On 28 March, a male and three females were present there, and on 30 March, we saw two males (both *carolinensis*) and three females. There are no previous Aruba records. The only previous record from the ABC islands came from Curaçao in 1996 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). Green-winged Teal regularly winters south to Honduras and the Bahamas, with a number of records south through the Greater and Lesser Antilles (Madge and Burn 1988, Raffaele et al. 1998). Venezuela has no records (Hilty 2003), but there is at least one record from Colombia (Hilty and Brown 1986) and two from Trinidad and Tobago (ffrench 1991).

### Swallow-tailed Kite

On 25 March, we noted a Swallow-tailed Kite hunting over the trees along the west side of Bubali Bird Sanctuary. The bird was noted there again on 30 March. This furnished Aruba's first record, and the only previous record from the ABC islands was from Bonaire on 25 April 2002 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). The geographic origin of the Bubali bird is not clear. Swallow-tailed Kites from the United States (*E. f. forficatus*) migrate primarily via the Mexican/Central American isthmus (though a route through Cuba is increasingly well documented; K. Meyer, unpubl. data) and

winter in South America (Raffaele et al. 1998, Ferguson-Lees and Christie 2001). Two seen in Haiti during August 1999 provided the only record from the Greater Antilles east of Cuba and Eleuthera (Norton 2000), and *E. f. forficatus* has not yet been recorded in Venezuela (Hilty 2003). Central and South American birds (*E. f. yetapa*) are at least partly migratory and regularly cross water to breed in Trinidad, where the species is present mainly from March to August (ffrench 1991). Sub-specific identification in the field is not reliable, but given what is known about the natural history of the two races, *E. f. yetapa* seems more likely.

### Southern Lapwing

On 30 March, we found two Southern Lapwings at Tierra del Sol Golf Course. The birds were walking along the edge of a golf green near the marshy extension of the lake. The pale anterior neck indicated *V. c. cayennensis*, the race that breeds in northern Venezuela (Hayman et al. 1986). Previous Aruba records are from 6 June 1979 and 30 May 2001 (Voous 1983, Norton and White 2001). The population of Southern Lapwing in northern South America appears to be increasing, with recent colonization of Trinidad and Tobago (ffrench 1991, F. Hayes, A. Jaramillo, pers. comm.) and increasing numbers noted in Costa Rica (e.g., Jones 2003).

### Tennessee Warbler

An alternate-plumaged adult male Tennessee Warbler at Spanish Lagoon on 25 March furnished Aruba's first record. Voous (1983) listed only one spring and three fall records from Bonaire and Curaçao; subsequently, only one other Tennessee has been recorded, a bird on Bonaire in March 2000 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). This species' scarcity in the ABC islands is surprising, as it is a common winter resident in northern Venezuela (Hilty 2003); however, it is believed to be a vagrant to the Virgin Islands and Barbados (Raffaele et al. 1998), and ffrench (1991) listed no records for Trinidad and Tobago. This pattern implies that Tennessee Warblers reach Venezuela mostly via Central America rather than by flying across the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean.

### Northern Parula

We located a total of nine Northern Parulas between 23 and 30 March. Three were in the broadleaf woods at Bubali,

four were in the mangroves at Spanish Lagoon, and two were in mangroves at Pos Chiquito. The only previous record for Aruba was from 1997 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.), though Voous (1983) listed 10 records for Bonaire and Curaçao. At least three of the birds observed were adult males, and one was an immature that had not yet undergone pre-alternate molt. The remainder were either immatures or adult females.

Northern Parula winters primarily in the West Indies, where it is common south through at least the Virgin Islands, uncommon in the Lesser Antilles south to Martinique, and rare farther south (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Raffaele et al. 1998). Venezuela has only three records, all from fall (Hilty 2003), and there are five records from Trinidad and Tobago (Hayes 2003).

### Cape May Warbler

On 24 March, we located an adult female or immature male Cape May Warbler in the trees bordering Bubali. The previous Aruba records are from 2 April 1961 and 26 January 1979 (Voous 1983). Currently, there are only four records from Bonaire and one from Curaçao (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). This species winters primarily in the Bahamas and Greater Antilles, where relatively common (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Raffaele et al. 1998). Cape May Warbler is uncommon in the Virgin Islands and rare to very rare in the Lesser Antilles (Raffaele et al. 1998). It is considered rare in northern Venezuela and on Trinidad and Tobago (ffrench 1991, Hilty 2003).

### Ovenbird

An Ovenbird was located on 23 March in a small grove of trees near the sewage treatment plant at Bubali. There are only three previous records from Aruba, the most recent of which is from 1975 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.). Voous (1983), however, listed at least 22 from Bonaire and Curaçao, suggesting that this species is more regular than previously noted on Aruba. Ovenbirds winter in Mexico and Central America south to central Panama and in the West Indies, where most common north and west of the Virgin Islands (Dunn and Garrett 1997, Raffaele et al. 1998). This species is uncommon in the Virgin Islands and rare in the Lesser Antilles (Raffaele et al. 1998). Hilty (2003) considered Ovenbirds rare in northern Venezuela, and ffrench (1991) listed only three records for Trinidad and Tobago.

## Hooded Warbler

We found a female Hooded Warbler among the mangroves at Spanish Lagoon on 23 March and a male in the trees at Bubali on 24 and 30 March. The two previous Aruba records were from April 1977 and November 1978 (Reuter and Prins, in prep.; Voous 1983). However, as of the early 1980s, there were at least 11 other records from the ABC islands (Voous 1983). This species winters primarily from eastern Mexico south to eastern Honduras and Nicaragua (Dunn and Garrett 1997). In the West Indies, it is generally rare to uncommon, excepting the Lesser Antilles, where it is a vagrant (Raffaele et al. 1998). There are only about five records from Venezuela (Hilty 2003), and French (1991) listed only one from Trinidad and none from Tobago.

## Red-breasted Blackbird

On 28 March we found a Red-breasted Blackbird in the marsh at Tierra del Sol Golf Course. There were no previous Aruba records (Reuter and Prins, in prep.), but this species is common in grassy pastures and rice fields in northern Venezuela and is known to wander erratically in post-breeding flocks, especially from March to May (Hilty 2003). Notably, its range has been increasing in South and Central America (Jaramillo and Burke 1999). Red-breasted Blackbirds are common on Trinidad, and small numbers occur sporadically on Tobago (French 1991; F. Hayes, pers. comm.). Raffaele et al. (1998) list no records for the West Indies.

## Discussion

The visit to Aruba during late March 2003 yielded a surprising number of species never reported or rarely reported for that island. A number of factors likely contributed to these finds. The occurrence of Green-winged Teal and Northern Pintail was probably related to a widespread incursion of North American waterfowl into the southern Caribbean during the harsh 2002–2003 winter. Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*), and Lesser Scaup (*A. affinis*) were the species most widely noted (F. Hayes, pers. comm.). Additionally, an American Black Duck (*A. rubripes*) and a Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) on the Virgin Islands, plus a Greater Scaup (*A. marila*) at Barbados, provided first local records of those species (F.

Hayes, E. Massiah, pers. comm.). Population expansions may explain the occurrence of three other species. Little Egret, Southern Lapwing, and Red-breasted Blackbird all have been undergoing range expansions and are therefore probably more likely to occur as vagrants (Patten and Burger 1998, Veit 2000). Our success in finding warblers was probably related in part to use of "pishing" while looking for passerines. Most of the unusual warbler species we located on Aruba were found in flocks drawn close by such noises, and many might have been missed had we not been employing this method consistently. Finally, for all species concerned, it must be noted that Aruba is relatively under-birded. It is the only one of the ABC islands without a resident birder or ornithologist (T. Prins, pers. comm.), so vagrant and uncommon species undoubtedly occur on Aruba more often than has been documented.

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