

## A SPECIES IN DANGER - By Alwin Dornelly

### The White Breasted Thrasher

The Avian or bird community in St. Lucia is very diverse and is represented both as residents and migrants. This unique feature that we enjoy, forms an integral part of the island's biodiversity. For example, fruit-eating birds such as the St. Lucian Parrot, consumes large amounts of fruits and helps in the process of plant regeneration via seed dispersal. The new plants will some day produce fruits thus providing food resources for successive parrot generations. Such interdependence between the two species ensures the perpetuation of their individual life forms. If the fruit-bearing trees perish by malicious causes, so does the parrot. This is just a simple case of loss of biodiversity. On a wide and general scale, the loss will be catastrophic. In observance of **International Biodiversity Day**, it is important to recognize the efforts of the Forestry Department in the conservation and protection of its forest and wildlife resources, particularly birds and their habitats. In addition to work done on the St. Lucian Parrot, one other species, which comes into focus, is the White-breasted Thrasher.

The White-breasted Thrasher, (*Ramphocinclus brachyurus*), locally called "Gorge-blanc", is a member of the Mockingbird family, Mimidae. It is restricted in geographic range to only two islands of the Lesser Antilles, St. Lucia and Martinique. Within the genus, two sub-species are found, the St. Lucian race *R. b. sanctaeluciea*, and its Martiniquan counterpart *R. b. brachyurus*. This means that both thrasher races are endemic to the respective islands. They both have declined significantly in population status over the years, and this has warranted their listing in the Red Data Book as endangered.

Early ornithological explorations on the thrasher date back to the latter part of the 1800s when it was described as being distinct from that found in Martinique. Until in the early 1900s, the species appeared to have been widespread in distribution, but today is restricted to a narrow band on the eastern coast between Petit Anse and Praslin. In 1927, an ornithologist by the name of James Bond, who devoted most of his adult life to the study of Caribbean birds, described the bird then, as a rare species. His conclusion at the time was based on attempts made during that spring to collect and study rare, and common species on the island. He succeeded in finding a small population in the northeast area near Le Marquis, and obtained one specimen for his collection. In 1932, other specimens were again collected further south in Grand Anse, on the eastern side of Morne La Sorcière by another biologist, Stanley John. In 1971 a survey recovered 75 pairs between Louvet and Grand Anse. However, by 1992 a subsequent survey revealed a total of only 46 pairs, notwithstanding the fact that a wider range had been covered. By 1995, and supported by the Department of Forestry, the species was recorded around Dennery Knob and further south in the Praslin area. Up to the present, this has been the southernmost record of the thrasher.

The adult White-breasted Thrasher is chocolate brown, with a white patch on the breast, as its name suggests. Juveniles are entirely brown with the white breast colour

emerging as development occurs. The thrasher is a ground-hunting bird, and has been found to occupy predominantly riverine forest within the dry forest areas, along its recorded range. Recent sightings have suggested that the species appears to be occupying areas at higher elevations, but still within the periphery of the dry forest. Individuals appear to be highly sedentary, perhaps restricting their movement not far beyond riverine habitats. They forage primarily on the ground, vigorously turning over the leaf litter in search of invertebrates. Occasionally, individuals have also been recorded, picking berries from nearby trees, and in very rare instances searching under the foliage at about 5 metres from the ground for insects. Foraging usually occurs either in pairs or individually.

Recent ecological studies supported by the Department have shown that the species breed between April and August. However, it is likely that nesting patterns may vary over different years due to changes in climatic conditions. They build a bulky cup-shaped nest made out of small twigs and leaves, with a lining of fibres. Their nests are usually located in the crown of shrubs or low saplings at an average height of 5 m above the ground. More commonly, adults lay two pale, sky-blue eggs. The species generally appear to be very wary around their nests, and typically approach the nest in a series of short flights before landing to incubate or to feed the young. Incubating adults usually sit low in the nest with only their bills sticking out. There is great uncertainty as to whether only one adult incubates, or whether the responsibility is shared. This problem exists because the species is not sexually dimorphic. Both adults expend considerable energy into chick development, carrying food and feeding the young. They also seem to occupy a breeding territory, which is actively defended against intruders. Defensive acts involve short chasing flights and periods of wing flickering, accompanied by low hissing calls. The young nestlings commonly fledge from the nest at tender ages by jumping out. More often, their feathers are still under-developed, and this results in only short, weak flights. At that stage they are highly vulnerable to predation by other animals, and are almost always accompanied by the adults.

As has been the case with the St. Lucian Parrot and other wildlife species in St. Lucia, one of the major threats affecting the species is habitat destruction. Much of the thrasher's habitat is under private ownership, exposing them to greater threats. The island's strong dependence on agricultural crops such as bananas, cassava and many others has brought about a displacement of vast areas of natural forest by these crops. Such activities have occurred both in elevated as well as flatland areas. Furthermore, the sedentary nature of the species has compounded its problems, as populations become isolated and fragmented by loss of habitat. Further stress to the population has been created by colonization of the Bare-eyed Robin, Pearly-eyed Thrasher, and Gray Trembler, which are highly aggressive and threaten eggs and nestlings. Strong evidence of predation by American kestrels and Broad-winged Hawk, both of which are birds of prey, has also been recorded. In addition, the habit of low nesting by the thrasher tremendously exposes it to other predators such as rats, mongooses, and snakes.

Just as has been done on the St. Lucian Parrot, research on the white-breasted thrasher has definitely helped to bring about a greater understanding among those

concerned with the natural existence of the species, and the plight that it currently faces. For over 50 years, the species has faced population decline, and the trend seems to be continuing. The mandate given to the Forestry Department for the protection of wildlife through the Wildlife Protection Act of 1983, has benefited wildlife in general. However, many species appear to be heading for extinction. And such is the case with the White-breasted Thrasher. The future of the thrasher does not lie entirely in the enforcement of the present legislation, but more so in the exclusive protection of its remaining habitat. This is the key. In the absence of such conservation practices and other protective measures, the species is bound to vanish.