notes from the field…

Growing Conservation and Field Research

The Island of Hispaniola

by **Todd Katzner, Ph.D.**, Director of Conservation and Field Research

Nearly two years ago I came to Pittsburgh dreaming of building a special conservation and field research program at the National Aviary. Back then I saw potential but little possibility. The potential came from the enthusiasm and support of Dayton Baker, the Executive Director, and Patti Rambasek, Director of Development and Communications. In building a program, though, potential alone is not enough, and possibility is determined almost exclusively by one thing — money. Twenty-two months ago there was little money to grow a program.

Sometimes, however, potential begets possibility, as fund raising efforts soon grew our endowment so that we could hire another biologist. It then became my responsibility to grow the program strategically, insure its long-term stability, move us toward our departmental goals, and progress toward that special program that I envisioned two years ago.

Our goal for the coming year is to grow our endowment to allow our staff to expand, filling unique niches in the conservation world and addressing critical priority issues in conservation and field research that others are not.

Photo © Daniel V. Klein

Dr. Steven Latta, Assistant Director of Conservation and Field Research at the National Aviary.

I reflected on potential and possibility last February as I sat halfway up a tree outside a small concrete house on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. My arboreal host was rooted in the little town of Mencia, just on the Dominican side of the border that separates Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In another age Mencia would probably have been classified as a one-horse town. In modern times at least half the occupied households in town harbored noisy fighting cocks and a more appropriate barnyard analogy might be a "rooster's run."

Mencia, though, is important for reasons other than its fighting roosters. It is perched high in the montane woodland of the Bahoruco Mountains. This region has the largest remaining patches of native forest on Hispaniola and therefore supports unusually high populations of endemic fauna. Consequently, Mencia is home base for one of the most important long-term ornithological conservation studies in the Caribbean. For eleven years — longer than nearly any other North American — Dr. Steven Latta has conducted his studies in the Bahorucos.

I was in Mencia for a number of reasons. Shortly after arriving in Pittsburgh I convened a scientific advisory committee for my Department. Although I intended to focus research and conservation efforts in North America, we asked committee members where else in the world our little program could disproportionately impact ornithological conservation. Hispaniola was at the top of the list they produced. Because the island is also a nearly ideal case study for evaluating impacts of human population on wildlife (another departmental goal), building programs on Hispaniola quickly became an institutional priority.

It was therefore natural for me to gravitate toward Steve's studies — the world's most significant Hispaniolan bird conservation and research initiative. I was in Mencia to see his program and to evaluate how the National Aviary might best contribute to Hispaniolan bird conservation. During that visit, Steve and I talked in depth and we got to know each other well. In the course of those discussions, something else came

Photo by Todd Katzner

Photo by Lance Woolaver

Above: Steve and colleague Marisabel Paulino band a Greater Antillian Bullfinch. Right: A White-headed Quail-dove, found only on the island of Hispaniola.

out. Steve's job at the time provided little opportunity to build programs on Hispaniola and he longed to spend more of his time working there.

Sitting on my tree limb outside Steve's field crew's house, I reflected on the strange convergence in which I found myself. The Department of Conservation and Field Research had the funds to hire a new scientist, we'd established Hispaniola as a priority, and Steve Latta was looking to take his DR programs to a new level. It wasn't a great leap forward to realize that Steve was the natural person to bring on as the next scientist at the National Aviary.

Events have moved quickly since last spring. In September Steve started work at the National Aviary, as Assistant Director for Conservation and Field Research, with a focus on Hispaniola. As I noted earlier, this is a strategic priority for the National Aviary and there is no better person in the world to grow our Hispaniola programs than Steve Latta. Steve brings over a dozen years of experience working in the Caribbean and Latin America. He is a highly regarded scientist and educator who has published repeatedly in top ecology and conservation journals and he has trained numerous students abroad and here in the US. In late 2006, Princeton University Press will publish *Guide to the Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti*. This field guide, of which he is the primary author, is the first complete treatment of all of the birds of Hispaniola. It is a testament to Steve's belief in the role of locals in preserving biodiversity that he pushed hard to raise the funds to ensure that the book was published in three languages – English for North Americans, Spanish for Dominicans and Latin Americans, and French for Haitians.

Steve's current work on Hispaniola focuses on evaluating the impact of land clearing on wintering Neotropical migratory and permanent resident forest birds. He evaluates measures of bird abundance, community structure, demographics, site fidelity and survival in order to make comparisons with data from undisturbed forest. These studies will provide a basis for sound management, conservation and reforestation activities. At the National Aviary Steve will broaden his research program to look at the factors affecting population size and ecology of threatened species endemic to Hispaniola. As part of our Hispaniola initiative, we are also building links with local Pittsburgh organizations with interests in the island, including reforestation specialists at Hopital Albert Schweitzer in Haiti and zoologists at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History.

The addition of Steve Latta to the Department of Conservation and Field Research is just a small step in what we hope will be the rapid growth of a unique Pittsburgh program. Already the National Aviary has the largest conservation and field research program of any similarly sized US zoological institution and more research staff than most US zoos. In coming years our goal is to grow our endowment to hire more top-flight biologists, so that we can continue to fill unique niches in the conservation world and address issues in conservation and field research that others are unable or unwilling to confront.

For information on National Aviary conservation and field research projects, visit http://www.aviary.org/dcfr.php