

The Dominican Republic



Mar/Apr 2022

**A Birding Trip
Report by
Ian Merrill**

Dominican Republic: 25th March to 3rd April

Where

A Dominican Republic itinerary writes itself, with the majority of birding time being dedicated to the southwest, where almost the complete suite of the endemics are to be found. An additional short leg to the north is also required, in order to secure Ridgway's Hawk, which has a very limited range centered on Los Haitises National Park.

In the southwest the most productive birding is found on the wetter north slope of the Sierra de Bahoruco range, between Rabo de Gato and Zapoten, an area which is dominated by deciduous forest. The drier south-facing pine slopes of the Alcoa Road are significantly less species-diverse, but hold a couple of key birds. The predominantly deciduous forest at the eastern end of the dividing range, at Cachote or Loma la Hoz, is noticeably drier than the Zapoten area, but still supports some good birding and at least one key bird.



View from Cabo Rojo headland, looking east

Our complete itinerary was as follows:

Fri 25th March Air Europa flight from Gatwick to Santa Domingo Las Americas Airport, via Madrid, arriving c20.00 local time. Thirty minute taxi ride from airport to [Santa Domingo Ramada Princess Hotel](#). Very expensive rooftop beers before bed.

Sat 26th March Hotel breakfast then 07.00 pickup by our guide, Miguel Landestoy, complete with 4WD. Four ticks in hotel car park! Twenty minute drive to Santa Domingo Botanical Gardens for two hours of great introductory birding. Key bird: West Indian Whistling Duck. c4.5 hour drive west to Puerto Escondido, via lunch stop at Restaurant Francia, Azua. Birding on Rabo de Gato Trail until dark. Check into [Rio Barrancoli Eco Lodge](#), evening meal and early night.

Sun 27th March 04.30 start for steep two hour ascent to Zapoten, on extremely rough roads, via pre-dawn nightbird stop. All morning birding the roadside, up and down slope of 'Thrush Corner'. Intermittent rain keeping bird activity high, packed breakfast at ranger station. Key birds: Hispaniolan Nightjar, Hispaniolan Trogon, La Selle Thrush, Western Chat-Tanager, Golden Swallow, White-fronted Quail Dove, Bicknell's Thrush, 'Hispaniolan' Loggerhead Kingbird. Slow afternoon descent, including brief foray into Haiti, ending the day back on the Rabo de Gato Trail. Evening meal at [Rio Barrancoli Eco Lodge](#).

Mon 28th March Pre-dawn birding in Lodge grounds. Key bird: Least Poorwill. Breakfast then morning birding Rabo de Gato Trail and agricultural fields to the north. Key birds: Bay-breasted Cuckoo, Antillean Siskin. Lunch at Lodge then check out and three hour drive to Perdonales, via late pm birding stop at Laguna de Oviedo and post-dark nightbirding on Alcoa Road. Check into [Hostal Dona Chava](#), Perdonales, evening meal.

Tue 29th March Breakfast at hotel then thirty minute drive to Alcoa Road for whole morning up to ranger station for packed lunch. Key birds: Golden Swallow, Hispaniolan Crossbill, Hispaniolan Palm Crow. Late afternoon drive to Cabo Rojo for seawatching. Key bird: White-tailed Tropicbird. Post-dark nightbirding on Alcoa Road. Back to [Hostal Dona Chava](#) for evening meal.

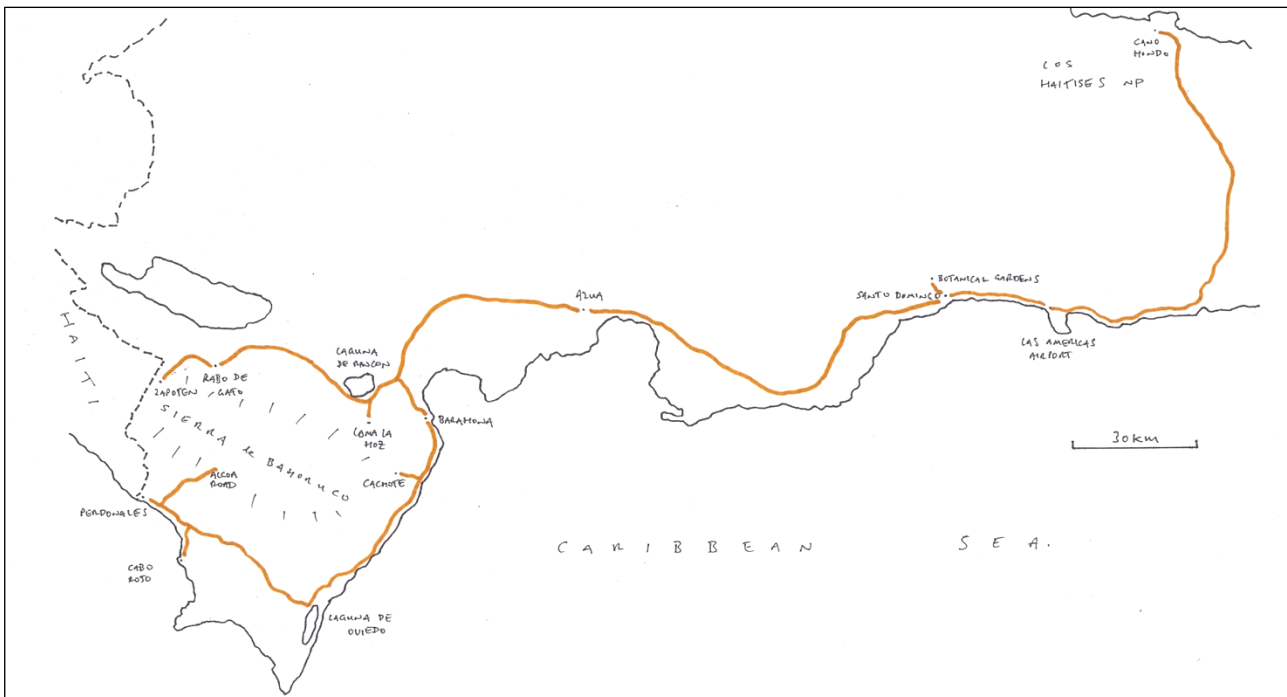
Weds 30th March Breakfast at hotel, check out, then thirty minute drive to Alcoa Road for morning birding as far as Mirador Hoyo de Pelempito. Key birds: Golden Swallow, Hispaniolan Palm Crow. Late morning drive to Cabo Rojo for seawatching. Key bird: White-tailed Tropicbird. Two hour drive northeast to Barahona, with lunch stop en route. Check into [Hotel Carib](#), Barahona, brief siesta then nightbirding on Cachote Road. Key bird: Ashy-faced Owl.

Thurs 31st March Early start and ninety minute drive to Loma la Hoz, via roadside coffee/hot chocolate stop. Steep ascent on rough road then full morning birding, including field breakfast. Key birds: Eastern Chat Tanager, Hispaniolan Trogon, Hispaniolan Crossbill. Back to Barahona early afternoon for fine seafood meal at [Restaurante Brisas Del Caribe](#). Visit bank, brief birding on coast, then back to hotel for relaxing evening with meal at [Hotel Carib](#).

Fri 1st April Check out of hotel and early drive for thirty mins to Cabral, via roadside coffee/hot chocolate stop, for boat trip on Laguna del Rincon. No crakes located. Four hour drive back to Santa Domingo Las Americas Airport, to bid farewell to Miguel and pick up our hire car. Three hour drive north to Sabina de la Mar, check into [Altos de Cano Hondo](#). Evening meal and nightbirding. Key bird: Ashy-faced Owl.

Sat 2nd April Birding and photography in hotel grounds pre breakfast. Meet local guide Juan Cespedes for a couple of hours birding on trails west of hotel. Key bird: Ridgway's Hawk. Lunch, siesta, evening birding around mangroves and paddies north of hotel. Evening meal [Altos de Cano Hondo](#) and nightbirding.

Sun 3rd April Birding and photography in hotel grounds pre breakfast. Post breakfast birding on trails west of hotel. Key bird: Ridgway's Hawk. Siesta, check out, three hour drive to Santa Domingo Las Americas Airport for evening Air Europa flight back to Gatwick, via Madrid, arriving in UK 16.30 on Mon 3rd April.



When

Although the entire winter period is fine for birding in the Dominican Republic, most birders visit from January to April, when the weather tends to be more settled and breeding birds are starting to become more vocal; many species were already nest building at the time of our March/April visit.

How

Our team for the Caribbean adventure consisted of myself, Andy Deighton, Mark Welfare and Graham Sorrie, which enabled us to comfortably split our overhead costs four ways and facilitate a very cost-effective trip.

[Air Europa](#) proved to be a fine budget carrier for our long haul flight from the UK. Hire car for the short Cano Hondo leg was sourced via [Thrifty](#); SUV recommended, even on this element of the trip, in order to mitigate potential damage from the many potholes and some unfeasibly steep speed ramps!

For trips to Zapoten and Cachote/Loma la Hoz a high clearance 4WD vehicle is absolutely essential. 4WD vehicles can be sourced locally or hired for the full trip, but both options are potentially problematic, costly and risky; stories abound of birders who booked a 4WD on-line only to find an SUV upon arrival, which would have no chance of negotiating the extremely poor roads to the above sites.

All hotels in the southwest were booked independently by our guide, with only Cano Hondo being booked from the UK. Every one was perfectly adequate and food was of a good standard throughout the trip.

We opted to employ the services of local guide Miguel Landestoy for the entire southwest leg of the trip, on the advice of friends who had used him previously. Miguel has his own 4WD, and thereby acted as our driver, bird guide, translator and general fixer throughout the first seven days. I cannot recommend Miguel highly enough, in terms of his supreme birding skills, general knowledge of all things Hispaniolan, logistical prowess and flexibility. Add to this an extremely relaxed and good-humoured manner, along with a determination to seek out all the key birds, making Miguel an absolutely top class bird guide.

Contact Miguel via email at: mango_land@yahoo.com or by text/WhatsApp on +1 (809) 705 2430. Please bear in mind that Miguel often takes some time to respond, as he spends significant time in the field both guiding and also in his role as a biologist, where he can be out of phone reception range for days on end; give him extra time to reply and you will not be disappointed!

At Cano Hondo we used Juan Cespedes for a few hours to find Ridgway's Hawk. Juan speaks very little English but seems to be ever-present around the hotel and is very likely to find you! Tel: +1 (829) 708 0629. Although a guide for Ridgway's Hawk is not really necessary, it did assure us of rapid success and supported the local ecotourism economy.

Finally, in the face of global warming and the known impacts of air travel upon climate change, I would urge anyone undertaking journeys such as the one described above to consider carbon offsetting via the excellent scheme hosted by the [World Land Trust](#).



The 'road' to Zapoten, approached from the north; high clearance 4WD is a must!

Cover image: Ashy-faced Owl, Cachote Road. All images by the author unless stated otherwise

Notes on Key Target Species and Local Specialties E = Endemic to Hispaniola**West Indian Whistling Duck** *Dendrocygna arborea*

Five seen in Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens on 26/03/22. Two were unfeasibly close on an ornamental pond, three more in the creek below at 18°29'38.94"N 69°57'00.5"W. Perhaps one of the most reliable sites in the Caribbean for this very scarce species?



West Indian Whistling Duck, Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens

Least Poorwill *Siphonorhis brewsteri brewsteri* E

Commonly heard on the Rabo de Gato Trail and also the Cachote Road, this species proved very difficult to see as it was rather unresponsive to playback. Only seen once, pre-dawn on 28/03/22 at the rear of the Rio Barrancoli Eco Lodge compound.

Hispaniolan Nightjar *Antrostomus ekmani* E

Similarly to the above species, heard widely but even more difficult to lure in than the Poorwill. Heard on the Rabo de Gato Trail, Zapoten Road and Alcoa Road, but only seen on the Zapoten ascent on 27/03/22, when two birds displayed brilliantly above our heads in a forest clearing.

Northern Potoo *Nyctibius jamaicensis abbotti*

Sadly heard only on the Alcoa Road on 29/3/22.

Antillean Palm Swift *Tachornis phoenicobia phoenicobia*

Recorded in large numbers on every day of the trip.

Antillean Mango *Anthracothorax dominicus dominicus*

Only recorded at the lowland sites of Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens, Rabo de Gato and Cano Hondo, though not at all difficult to see at these sites, especially around appropriate garden flowers.

Vervain Hummingbird *Mellisuga minima vielloti*

Recorded at Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens, Rabo de Gato, Alcoa Road and Cano Hondo, in small numbers.

Hispaniolan Emerald *Riccordia swainsonii* E

Recorded at Rabo de Gato, Alcoa Road and Loma la Hoz, in small numbers.



Bay-breasted Cuckoo and Hispaniolan Emerald, Rabo de Gato

Mangrove Cuckoo *Coccyzus minor*

Singles at Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens and Cano Hondo.

Bay-breasted Cuckoo *Coccyzus ruficularis* E

One of the toughest endemics to locate, after many hours of trawling we were rewarded early on 20/03/22 on the Rabo de Gato Trail, with a single vocal bird at 18°18'32.51"N 71°35'44.49"W.

Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo *Coccyzus longirostris* E

Either seen or heard at all birding sites visited, even being noted in the suburban setting of our hotel at Perdonales.

White-crowned Pigeon *Patagioenas leucocephala*

Several seen on the Alcoa Road and also at Cano Hondo.

Scaly-naped Pigeon *Patagioenas squamosa*

Only seen at Rabo de Gato, heard at Loma la Hoz.

Plain Pigeon *Patagioenas inornata*

Regularly seen in all lowland forest areas.

Ruddy Quail-Dove *Geotrygon montana montana*

Only noted at Cano Hondo, where a single was seen and at least four heard.

White-fronted Quail-Dove *Geotrygon leucometopia* E

A very tough bird to see at the time of our visit, with the normally reliable Rabo de Gato Trail drawing a blank. Single seen on two separate occasions at Zapoten, on the track above 'Thrush Corner', on 27/03/22.

Key West Quail-Dove *Geotrygon chrysis*

This very attractive dove was seen several times on the Rabo de Gato Trail, with more heard.



Key West Quail Dove, Rabo de Gato (Andy Deighton) and Hispaniolan Lizard Cuckoo, Alcoa Road

Zenaida Dove *Zenaida aurita zenaida*

Small numbers seen daily in the south west.

American Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber*

Only seen at Laguna de Oviedo on 20/3/22, where c120 were counted.

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus catesbyi*

Up to eight seen on our visits to Cabo Rojo on 29 and 30/03/22, where they breed on the headland cliffs.

Sharp-shinned Hawk *Accipiter striatus striatus*

A single seen soaring above a forested valley on the descent from Zapoten on 27/03/22.

Ridgway's Hawk *Buteo ridgwayi* E

Pair seen just west of our Cano Hondo hotel on both 02 and 03/04/22. According to our local guide the first nesting attempt had failed, however we witnessed copulation and apparent nesting activity suggesting that a replacement clutch of eggs would be along very soon. 19°03'22.99"N 69°27'21.11"W.

Ashy-faced Owl *Tyto glaucops* E

On 30/3/22 a pair responded rapidly to recordings on the lower reaches of the Cachote Road and gave superb photogenic views. Later a second bird was briefly seen, again in response to playback. On 01/04/22 a single bird responded to a recording on the Cano Hondo access road at 19°02'57.42"N 69°26'13.54"W, where it was photographed. On 02/04/22 a bird was heard calling just north of Cano Hondo, from the Los Haitises National Park boat trip car park, but remained inaccessible behind a high barbed wire fence.

Burrowing Owl *Athene cunicularia troglodytes*

One on the lower reaches of the road to Zapatan on 27/03/22 and one on the Alcoa Road on 29/03/22.

Hispaniolan Trogon *Priotelus roseigaster* E

A surprising double-figure count at Zapoten on the morning of 27/3/22 and a single at Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22.



Ridgway's Hawk, Cano Hondo (Graham Sorrie) and Hispaniolan Trogon, Loma de Hoz (Andy Deighton)

Broad-billed Tody *Todus subulatus* E

Not an uncommon bird of the low to mid altitude forests, this species was seen or heard on every day of the trip in small numbers.

Narrow-billed Tody *Todus angustirostris* E

Narrow-billed Tody replaces the previous species at higher altitudes, but with some overlap especially in the winter months. Recorded on every day of our stay at Rabo de Gato / Zapoten, also noted on the Alcoa Road and at Loma la Hoz.

Antillean Piculet *Nesotites micromegas micromegas* E

Although a widespread species, we only recorded Antillean Piculet at Rabo de Gato, Zapoten and Cano Hondo.

Hispaniolan Woodpecker *Melanerpes striatus* E

Recorded on every day of the trip, in all habitats, with counts of up to forty per day; this fantastic woodpecker was one of the most regularly encountered endemics.

Hispaniolan Amazon *Amazona ventralis* E

Regularly seen and heard above undisturbed native forests of the west, we recorded it at Rabo de Gato, Zapoten, Alcoa Road and Loma la Hoz. Maximum daily count of twenty on the Alcoa Road on 29/03/22.

Hispaniolan Parakeet *Psittacara chloropterus* E

Surprisingly our closest encounters of this species were in the car park of the Ramada Hotel, Santa Domingo, on the first morning of our trip! Groups of twenty or more were seen flying over the city from roosting sites at dawn, with more in the Botanical Gardens, on 26/03/22. The only other records were from the Alcoa Road on 29 and 30/03/22.



Broad-billed Tody, Rabo de Gato (top & mid-lt.) and Narrow-billed Tody, Loma la Hoz (mid-rt. and bottom)



Antillean Piculet, Zapoten (Graham Sorrie); Hispaniolan Woodpecker, Cano Hondo; Hispaniolan Amazon, Rabo de Gato; Hispaniolan Parakeet, Santo Domingo; Hispaniolan Palm Crow, Alcoa Road; White-necked Crow, Cano Hondo

Greater Antillean Elaenia *Elaenia fallax cherriei*

Up the ten recorded at Zapoten on 27/03/22, with smaller numbers on the Alcoa Road on 29/03/22 and Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22; at leucistic bird at the latter site was a surprise find.

Hispaniolan Pewee *Contopus hispaniolensis hispaniolensis* E

A handful of birds in the forests of Rabo de Gato, Zapoten and the Alcoa Road.

Loggerhead Kingbird *Tyrannus caudifasciatus gabbii*

A pair at Zapoten and another single on the descent from the same site on 27/03/22 were our only records of this scarce species which is already split by some authorities as 'Hispaniolan Loggerhead Kingbird'.

Stolid Flycatcher *Myiarchus stolidus dominicensis*

Small numbers seen in suitable habitat on every day of the trip.

Flat-billed Vireo *Vireo nanus* E

Singles on the descent from Zapoten on 27/03/22, on the Rabo de Gato Trail on 28/03/22 and at Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22; not at all common.

Hispaniolan Palm Crow *Corvus palmarum* E

Only recorded on the upper reaches of the Alcoa Road, most regularly around the ranger station where they scavenge from the bins. Six seen on 29/03/22 and two on 30/03/22.

White-necked Crow *Corvus leucognaphalus* E

Regularly encountered around the agricultural fields at Rabo de Gato, with a maximum of six of these noisy Corvids seen on 28/03/22. A pair on the lower Alcoa Road on 30/03/22 and up to four in our Cano Hondo hotel grounds on both days of our stay.



Palmchat, Cano Hondo and Golden Swallow, Alcoa Road

Palmchat *Dulus dominicus* E

Recorded daily, usually in the vicinity of palms though not exclusively. This monotypic genus was the most regularly recorded endemic of the trip, with notes indicating in excess of fifty sightings on at least three days. Most obvious and approachable in Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens and the in the grounds of our Cano Hondo hotel.

Golden Swallow *Tachycineta euchrysea sclateri* E*

More regularly encountered than expected, with up to twenty seen from Zapoten downwards to Rabo de Gato on 27/03/22. Also a couple over Rabo de Gato on 28/03/22, a maximum of eight over the Alcoa Road on 29 and 30/03/22 and a single over Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22 (* assumed now extinct in Jamaica).

Caribbean Martin *Progne dominicensis*

Although we counted up to twenty-five of these very dapper Hirundines over Santo Domingo on 26/03/22, our only other sightings were of a couple of individuals at each of Cabo Rojo and Perdonales on 30 and 31/03/22 respectively.

Rufous-throated Solitaire *Myadestes genibarbis montanus*

Two at Zapoten on 27/03/22 and a single at Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22; a beautiful bird and incredible songster.

Bicknell's Thrush *Catharus bicknelli*

One very skulking individual at Zapoten on 27/03/22.

La Selle Thrush *Turdus swalesi swalesi* E

Billed as a tricky bird to see well, the damp and overcast conditions during our morning at Zapoten played to our advantage and the thrushes remained active on the track until mid-morning; up to four seen and others heard. A large La Selle Thrush sign board announces one's arrival at what is now widely known as 'Thrush Corner' with our birds being seen from this point upwards for several kilometers.



Rufous-throated Solitaire, Loma la Hoz and La Selle Thrush, Zapoten

Hispaniolan Crossbill *Loxia megaplaga* E

One female seen and another heard in the Alcoa Road pines on 29/03/22, with more heard and an immature male seen at very close range at Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22.

Antillean Siskin *Spinus dominicensis* E

An impressive total count of 130 birds in the agricultural fields at Rabo de Gato on 28/03/22, where two large flocks fed on seeding grasses in field margins. Two in the Alcoa Road pines on 29/03/22.



Antillean Siskin, Rabo de Gato; Hispiolan Crossbill, Loma de Hoz; Western Chat-Tanager, Zapoten (Graham Sorrie); Black-crowned Tanager, Zapoten; Green-tailed Warbler, Zapoten (Andy Deighton); White-winged Warbler, Zapoten

Western Chat-Tanager *Calyptophilus tertius* E

Up to eight recorded at Zapoten on 27/03/22 and another heard on the Alcoa Road on 29/03/22.

Eastern Chat-Tanager *Calyptophilus frugivorus neibae* E

Two seen and four heard at Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22, a very shy bird of dense thickets which is difficult to observe well and proved impossible to photograph.

Black-crowned Tanager *Phaenicophilus palmarum* E

Seen in small numbers at Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens, Rabo de Gato, Zapoten, Loma la Hoz and Cano Hondo.

Green-tailed Warbler *Microligea palustris vasta* E

Six at Zapoten on 27/03/22 and a pair on the lower Alcoa Road on 31/03/22 were the only records.

White-winged Warbler *Xenoligea montana* E

Six at Zapoten on 27/03/22 and a pair at Loma la Hoz on 31/03/22 were the only records.

Hispaniolan Spindalis *Spindalis dominicensis* E

Not a common bird, with just a handful of records split between Santo Domingo Botanical Gardens, Rabo de Gato, Zapoten and Loma la Hoz.

Hispaniolan Oriole *Icterus dominicensis* E

Only recorded at Rabo de Gato and Zapoten, with up to six per day in this area.

Greater Antillean Grackle *Quiscalus niger niger*

Seen daily in the lowlands.

Pine Warbler *Setophaga pinus chrysoleuca*

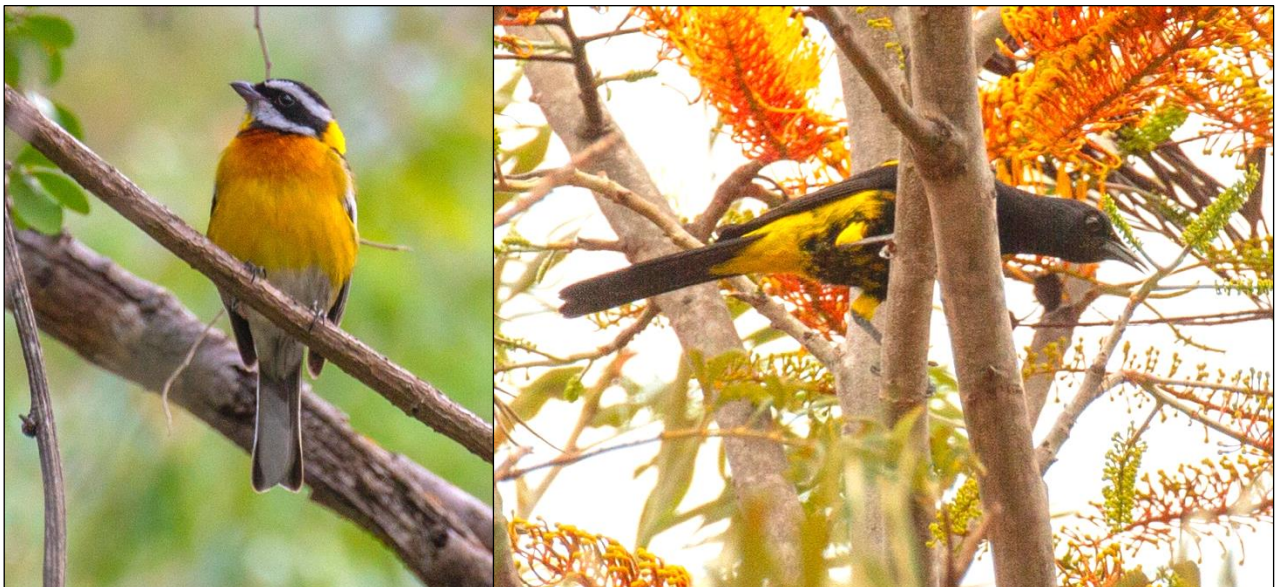
This endemic subspecies was recorded at Zapoten and on the Alcoa Road, singing from pine tops.

Greater Antillean Bullfinch *Melopyrrha violacea affinis*

Seen in small numbers at Rabo de Gato, Zapoten, Loma la Hoz and Cano Hondo.

Ian Merrill, Leicestershire, UK. April 2022.

i.merrill@btopenworld.com



Hispaniolan Spindalis, Rabo de Gato and *Hispaniolan Oriole*, Zapoten