

AUGUST 5, 2017

## Saving a Species in Peril—A Holistic Approach to Conserving the Ridgway's Hawk in the Dominican Republic

*Soaring above the tree tops of Los Haitises National Park is the mighty Ridgway's Hawk. Conflicts with humans and changes in its forest habitat have made it hard for this species to survive. Marta Curti tells us about the work of The Peregrine Fund to save this critically endangered raptor.*

The Ridgway's Hawk is endemic to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, but is now considered to be extinct in Haiti. The last remaining population of this species is in a small national park, Los Haitises, in the Dominican Republic (DR). There are only an estimated 350-450 individuals left in the wild.

I have been working as a biologist for The Peregrine Fund for the past 17 years. I have been lucky enough to have been a part of several of their projects helping to conserve birds of prey in many countries around the world. In 2011, I joined the team working in DR to help to save the Ridgway's Hawk from extinction.

The Peregrine Fund's Ridgway's Hawk conservation project has been running since 2002 and has many facets. When I was asked to share a short article about our project on the BirdsCaribbean blog, I spent a long time thinking what to write about. I could focus on the advances we have made to prevent botfly (*Philornis pici*) infestations in nestling Ridgway's Hawks – an issue that, if left untreated, could cause over 70% mortality in young hawks.

Or I could discuss the successes of our Assisted Dispersal Program: bringing young hawks from Los Haitises National Park and releasing them in Ojos Indigenas Reserve in Punta Cana in an effort to create additional populations of the hawk in other protected areas on the island. Assisted Dispersal has resulted in the formation of 15 breeding pairs to date and 22 wild fledged young!



*Ridgway's Hawks hatched in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic thanks to The Peregrine Fund's Assisted Dispersal Program. (Photo by The Peregrine Fund)*

and leadership skills.

We began our environmental education program in Punta Cana in 2013, after three of our released Ridgway's Hawks were shot in a nearby community. Since then, we have expanded our efforts and now work with over 15 communities and have reached over 7,000 individuals in a wide radius around the release site through door-to-door visits, educational presentations, school activities and teacher training workshops. One of the most fun and successful activities that we do every year (as part of our Caribbean Endemic Bird Festival) is the celebration of Ridgway's Hawk Day, May 25<sup>th</sup>.

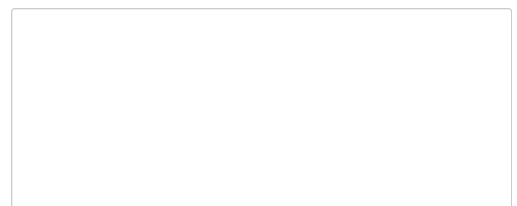


*Ridgway's Hawks are critically endangered and found only in Los Haitises National Park in the Dominican Republic. (Photo by The Peregrine Fund)*

Another aspect of the project I could mention is our collaboration with Fundación Grupo PUNTACANA and the Disney Conservation Fund to retrofit dangerous power lines preventing electrocutions of not only Ridgway's Hawks, but other species of birds as well. A whole other blog post could focus on our program to provide free chicken coops to individuals in small communities, an effort to help avoid conflicts between humans and hawks that sometimes prey on young poultry.

Instead, today I would like to tell you about our community development and our environmental education programs. One important aspect of The Peregrine Fund's work, is to improve the lives of people in areas where we are conserving birds of prey, whether through training, educational activities, or employment opportunities.

In the communities surrounding LHNP we are working with 17 local technicians that we have trained and hired. Some are in their 40s and 50s and have been with the project since its inception. Others are in their early twenties and are just beginning their careers. In small towns around LHNP, there are limited job opportunities and our project is able to provide economic benefits, employment and valuable training in skills such as tree climbing, data collection, bird banding, nest searching, as well as computer data entry



Thanks to a generous donation from BirdsCaribbean, this year we celebrated Ridgway's Hawk Day with three separate activities around the country! The first, we held with two of our local partners: the National Zoo (ZOODOM) and Fundación Propagas. Schoolchildren from Santo Domingo were treated to a close-up view of a live Ridgway's Hawk at the zoo, and also participated in an art project, receiving a raptor inspired mask at the end of their visit.

The second and third Ridgway's Hawk Day activities took place in Punta Cana, where, with the help of Fundación Grupo PUNTACANA – another important local partner, we hosted two celebrations on June 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Over 80 children visited our Ridgway's Hawk release site in Punta Cana and saw young hawks up close, learning about the release process and the importance of protecting wildlife. Participants also learned how to use binoculars on a nature walk while practicing birding in forests and lagoons. The children also created beautiful art, painting and coloring on recycled wood – which focused on Ridgway's Hawks, nature, and other wildlife observed during their visit. Select pieces will be displayed at an event in a local art museum early next year.



*A completed painting of a Ridgway's Hawk, done by one of the local schoolchildren. (Photo by The Peregrine Fund)*



*Participants are beginning to paint images of Ridgway's Hawks and other wildlife and nature scenes from the day. (Photo by The Peregrine Fund)*

To end the day, we headed down to a nearby beach where the kids played games in the sand, learning about the importance of a balanced ecosystem for creatures both on land and in the sea. After a picnic lunch under the shade of nearby trees, students clapped hands and swayed to the rhythm of drums during an interactive dance performance by one of our volunteers, in a full Ridgway's Hawk costume!

We have already begun to see the positive effects of our education efforts in communities, especially in the attitudes of individual people. Most notably, in the community where our three Ridgway's Hawks were killed a number of years ago, we now have a nesting pair of hawks who just fledged two perfectly healthy young! The entire community knows of the presence of the hawks and is now actively supporting their protection!

Though we still have a long way to go to ensure the conservation of the species, we continue to be encouraged by the changes we see taking place, making great strides each year and we look forward to the day that the Ridgway's Hawk is no longer an endangered species.



*A "Ridgway's Hawk" comes to visit. (photo by The Peregrine Fund)*

*Marta Curti works as a biologist with [The Peregrine Fund](http://peregrinefund.org) (<http://peregrinefund.org>), a non-profit organization whose mission is to conserve birds of prey worldwide.*