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Important Bird Areas AMERICAS

DOMINICA

Stephen Durand & Bertrand Jno. Baptiste



The Endangered Imperial Amazon (*Amazona imperialis*) or “Sisserou” is Dominica’s national bird and features on the country’s flag and Coat-of-Arms. It is also the largest of all *Amazona* parrots. Photo: Paul Reillo Ph.D./RSCF



Country facts at a glance

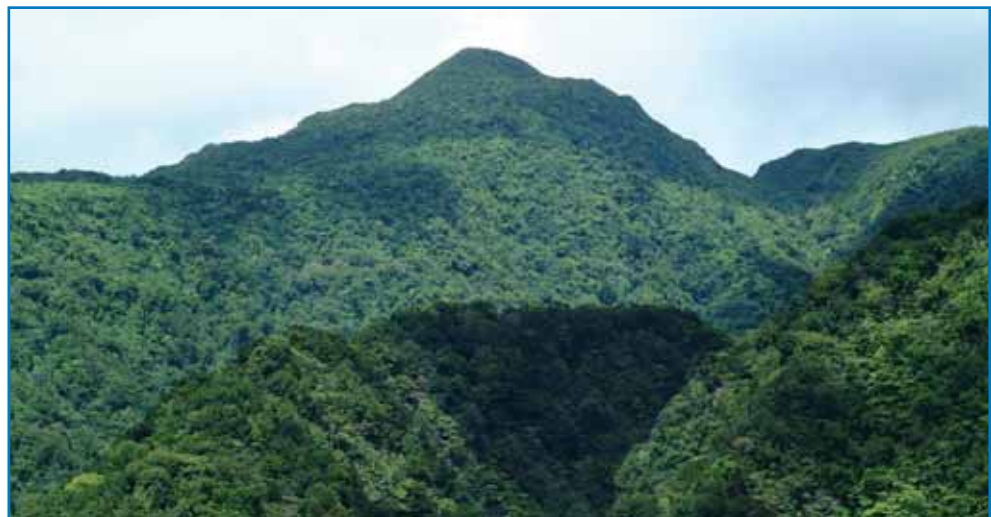
Area:	754 km ²
Population:	72,400
Capital:	Roseau
Altitude:	0–1447 m
Number of IBAs:	4
Total IBA area:	10,670 ha
IBA coverage of land area:	13 %
Total number of birds:	176
Globally threatened birds:	3
Globally threatened birds in IBAs:	3
Country endemics:	3 ¹

General introduction

The Commonwealth of Dominica is the most northerly of the Windward Islands, and at the mid-point of the Lesser Antillean chain. It lies between the French islands of Guadeloupe (c.28 km to the north) and Martinique (c.40 km to the south). The island is c.47 km long by 26 km wide, and is divided into 10 administrative parishes. Dominica is one of the youngest islands in the Lesser Antilles. Its volcanic origins have created an island characterized by very rugged and steep terrain. The volcanic cone of Morne Diablotin (1447 m), along with Morne Au Diable on the northern peninsula, dominates the topography of the northern half of the island, while a chain of mountains (including Morne Trois Pitons, Morne Micotrin, Morne Watt, Morne Anglais, and Morne Plat Pays) extends through the south of the island.

“The country’s undisturbed forests are undoubtedly more extensive than on any other island in the Lesser Antilles.”

Dominica’s climate is classified as humid tropical marine, characterized by little seasonal or diurnal variation and strong, steady trade winds. The island is among the wettest in the Caribbean, a factor which gives rise to its lush vegetation. Rainfall is higher in the interior which receives more than 10,000 mm annually, and drops off substantially to 1200 mm per year on the leeward (western) side of the island. Dominica’s vegetation comprises more than 1000 species of flowering plants with about 68 rainforest tree species. Major terrestrial ecosystems include mature tropical rainforest, montane thicket and cloud forest (elfin woodland), and littoral woodland along the windward coast. Dry scrub and xeric woodland occupy much of the leeward coast. Dominica has, with justification, been referred to as the “nature island of the Caribbean”. With its mostly unspoiled mountainous landscape, perennial streams, rivers and numerous waterfalls, and its great diversity of flora and fauna, the island is considered to be among the most beautiful and pristine countries in the world. The country’s undisturbed forests are undoubtedly more extensive than on any other island in the Lesser Antilles.



Morne Diablotin National Park (DM001) embraces all restricted-range and threatened species on Dominica.
Photo: Paul Reillo, RSCF/FWP Division

¹ Includes the extinct endemic species, Dominican Green-and-yellow Macaw (*Ara atwoodi*).

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Dominica's economy is heavily dependent upon tourism and agriculture, with c.20% of the workforce employed in the agricultural sector, particularly banana crops which have traditionally formed the backbone of the economy. Other primary agricultural exports include vegetables (e.g. dasheen, hot peppers and pumpkins), herbs, plantains, citrus, co-

conut oil and other essential oils. The island's lack of sandy beaches means that Dominica's tourism industry is dominated by scuba-diving and nature-tourism niche markets. Dominica's population is primarily concentrated along the flatter, coastal areas although in recent times there has been some limited residential development in the interior.

Conservation and protected area system

The Forestry, Wildlife and National Parks Division (FWP Division, within the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry) is the governmental agency responsible for the management of forest reserves and national parks, and for the conservation and protection of wild flora and fauna. Approximately 60% of Dominica is still under natural vegetative cover, albeit mostly on privately-owned lands. However, 20% of the island is under some form of protected area status. The legally established protected area system comprises two forest reserves (totaling 5688 ha), namely the Northern Forest Reserve and Central Forest Reserve; the three national parks (totaling c.10,746 ha) of Morne Trois Pitons National Park (a World Heritage Site), Morne Diablotin National Park, and Cabrits National Park; and the Soufriere–Scotts Head Marine Reserve that surrounds the Scotts Head Peninsula. It is important to note that the Cabrits National Park includes a 426-ha marine component. There are also large tracts of “Unallocated State Lands” in the Governor, La Guerre, Upper Layou, Morne Plaisance, and Fond Figues areas. Conservation in Dominica is implemented within the context of a number of statutes and pieces of legislation including the Forest Act, the National Parks and Protected Areas Act, and the Forestry and Wildlife Act. This latter act was amended in 1988 to make the Imperial Amazon (*Amazona imperialis*) and Red-necked Amazon (*A. arausiaca*) “specially protected birds”. However, this existing legislation needs strengthening to maximize its impact, and the FWP Division is in need of capacity building and professional training in natural resource



The Vulnerable Red-necked Amazon (*Amazona arausiaca*) or “Jaco” is endemic to Dominica.
Photo: Paul Reillo, RSCF/FWP Division

“Approximately 60% of Dominica still has natural vegetative cover, albeit mostly on privately-owned lands.”

management to more effectively execute the legislation. The lack of a proper land use policy for the country creates its own challenges for the land management and conservation programs being implemented.

In 1980, the World Wildlife Fund financed the Forestry Division's research project to determine the population status of the island's two parrot species following the devastation of the birds' habitats during the passage of Hurricane David in 1979. In 1989 RARE Centre assisted the Division with “Project Sisserou” which was designed to raise public awareness about the importance of the island's parrot species. The parrots have provided a focus for conservation action. There is currently an ongoing initiative between the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF) and the Government of Dominica to support the Forestry Division's parrot research and conservation program. This initiative started in 1997 and has broadened its scope significantly since then, bringing new technology and techniques to the Dominica Parrot Research Program; support and assistance in the establishment of the Morne Diablotin National Park; management and care for the Dominica Parrot Captive Breeding Program at the Parrot Conservation and Research Centre; and continuity in the FWP Division's environmental protection program. RSCF has also been supporting the Division's efforts to celebrate the annual month-long Caribbean Endemic Birds Festival—an important regional environmental awareness initiative (of the Society for the Conservation and Study of Caribbean Birds).

In spite of the conservation legislation and protective measures in place, biodiversity is under pressure in Dominica. Habitat is being lost due to agricultural expansion, housing development and proliferation of quarrying activities, but it is the illegal clearance of forest for agricultural activities (including marijuana) in the island's interior and areas used by the parrots that is of particular concern. Mature gommier trees (*Dacryodes excelsa*) are slashed for illegal gum harvesting. This is one of the key tree species used by both parrots for food and nesting. Natural disasters (e.g. tropical storms, hurricanes and volcanic activity) are also a significant threat to habitat. Hurricanes in particular are a major threat to the parrot populations, their nest trees, and foraging areas. Hurricane David devastated Dominica in 1979, nearly extirpating Imperial Amazon, and reducing Red-necked Amazon to a fragment of its former range.

Ornithological importance

A total of 176 species of birds have been recorded for Dominica, of which about 66% are Neotropical migrants and 34% (62 species) are resident species. Nineteen of the 38 Lesser Antilles Endemic Bird Area (EBA 030) restricted-range birds occur on the island, including the Blue-headed Hummingbird (*Cyanophaea bicolor*) which occurs just on Dominica and neighboring Martinique, and Plumbeous Warbler (*Dendroica plumbea*) which is shared only with Guadeloupe. Most significantly though, Dominica supports two single-island endemic Amazona parrots—the only small island in the Caribbean to do so. The Imperial Amazon, or “Sisserou”, (*Amazona imperialis*) is Dominica's national bird and is featured on the country's flag and Coat-of-Arms. It is also the largest of all Amazona parrots. It shares the island with Red-necked Amazon, or “Jaco”, (*Amazona arausiaca*).

Both of Dominica's parrots are globally threatened (the Sisserou being Endangered and the Jaco Vulnerable) and promoted as conservation



Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hasitata*) found at Trafalgar in May 2007.
Photo: Arlington James, FWP Division

flagship species. In the past, hunting for food and the pet trade, loss of habitat through natural disasters (particularly hurricanes) and increasing agricultural expansion were the main threats to both species. In recent times Red-necked Amazon has been depredated on farmers' citrus and passion fruit crops in several localities on the island.

“Dominica supports two single-island endemic *Amazona* parrots—the only small island in the Caribbean to do so.”

Dominica supports a third globally threatened bird species—the Vulnerable Forest Thrush (*Cichlherminia therminieri*), and may yet prove to be a breeding location for the Endangered Black-capped Petrel (*Pterodroma hasitata*). Breeding of this species has not been proven, but a small flock was seen at sea in April 1984 (off the south-east coast) and there are reports of birds calling at night in the south of the island from the 1980s. Most recently (in May 2007) a bird was found just outside the Morne Trois Pitons National Park. However, there is insufficient evidence to nominate a specific site to protect this species.

Blue-headed Hummingbird (*Cyanophaia bicolor*), endemic to Dominica and Martinique. Photo: Paul Reillo, RSCF/FWP Division

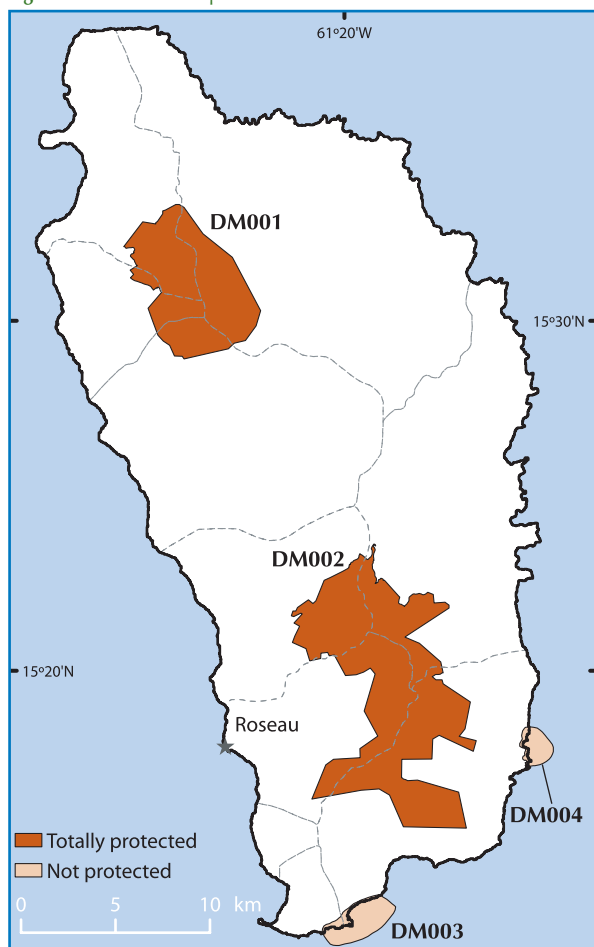


IBA overview

Table 1. Important Bird Areas in Dominica

IBA code	IBA name	Adm unit	Area (ha)	A1				A2	A3	A4				
				CR	EN	VU	NT			A4i	A4ii	A4iii	A4iv	
DM001	Morne Diablotin National Park	Parish of St. Andrew, Parish of St. John, Parish of St. Joseph, Parish of St. Peter	3,360	1	2			X						
DM002	Morne Trois Pitons National Park	Parish of St. David, Parish of St. George, Parish of St. Patrick	6,485	1	2			X						
DM003	Point Des Foux	Parish of St. Patrick	570					X			X			
DM004	L'Ilet	Parish of St. David	255								X			

Figure 1. Location of Important Bird Areas in Dominica



For information on trigger species at each IBA, see individual site accounts at BirdLife's Data Zone: www.birdlife.org/datazone/sites/

Of Dominica's four IBAs (Table 1, Figure 1), the two forest IBAs are national parks (totaling c.9845 ha), and thus 93% of the area covered by the island's IBAs is under protection. The remaining two IBAs are not formally protected.

The IBAs have been identified on the basis of 21 key bird species that variously trigger the IBA criteria. These 21 species include three globally threatened birds, all 19 restricted-range species, and two congregatory marine species. The two forested national park IBAs (Morne Diablotin and Morne Trois Pitons, IBAs DM001 and DM002) embrace populations of all the restricted-range species and the majority of the populations of all three globally threatened species (the two *Amazona* parrots and the Forest Thrush; *Cichlherminia therminieri*), emphasizing how critically important these two IBAs are for the maintenance of the island's biodiversity. Point Des Foux IBA (DM003) and L'Ilet IBA (DM004) between them support most of Dominica's breeding seabirds, but without any formal protection they remain vulnerable to poaching and potentially invasive mammalian predators.

Plumbeous Warbler (*Dendroica plumbea*) endemic to Dominica and Guadeloupe. Photo: Frantz Duzont



Opportunities



There is a need for regular monitoring and further research on Imperial Amazon's (*Amazona imperialis*) breeding biology. Parrot research activities should also be extended into remote areas within the Northern Forest Reserve, Morne Diablotin National Park and Morne Trois Pitons National Park to combat risks from both environmental and anthropogenic factors.

The parrot monitoring program also needs to be expanded to include field assessments (surveys and subsequent monitoring) for Forest Thrush (*Cichlherminia lherminieri*) and seabird populations. Monitoring results should be used to inform the annual assessment of state, pressure and response variables at each of the island's IBAs to provide an objective status assessment and highlight management interventions that might be required to maintain these internationally important biodiversity sites.

Dominican IBA also protects important populations of other threatened and endemic fauna



Further information

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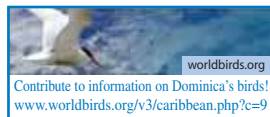
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Box 1

Morne Trois Pitons National Park, World Heritage Site and IBA is the largest National Park in Dominica, situated in the southern Dominican highlands. The IBA rises from the lowlands in the south-east of the island towards the three prominent peaks of Morne Trois Pitons and comprises some of the best remaining examples of volcanic island ecosystems in the Caribbean with active volcanic and geothermal areas. Apart from providing habitat to threatened and range-restricted birds, the IBA also holds the Endangered and endemic Dominican tink frog (*Eleutherodactylus amplinympha*), the endemic Dominica anolis (*Anolis oculatus*) and bromeliad (*Pitcairnia micotrinensis*). Populations of the endemic subspecies of agouti (*Dasyprocta leporina*) and opossum (*Didelphys marsupialis insularis*) and endemic boa (*Boa [constrictor] nebulosa*), which may warrant full species status, also occur. Threats to this site include unauthorized occupation of some areas for illegal agricultural activities leading to some deforestation. Volcanic activity and the effects of tropical storms and hurricanes are also an ever present threat.