

First Record of Caribbean Martin (*Progne dominicensis*) for Aruba

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Abstract

This paper documents the first record of Caribbean Martin (*Progne dominicensis*) for Aruba and considers the record in context of the species' occurrence elsewhere in the southern Caribbean islands.

Field Encounter

On 15 January 2002, from 1730 to 1830 AST, we had several brief observations of a martin (*Progne* species) flying over one of the buildings of the Divi Village Resort, Oranjestad, Aruba (formerly Netherlands Antilles). During these brief observations, we noted the bird's dark bluish upperparts, relatively deeply forked tail, dark upper chest and dark flanks, and white underparts that extended from the mid-breast through the undertail coverts.

The next day, we relocated the bird at the same location and studied it more carefully from 1730 to 1745 AST. At this time, we were able to ascertain that the bird showed a dark blue throat continuous with dark blue upper breast and sides and that this blue plumage contrasted sharply with the starkly white lower breast, belly, and undertail coverts. We identified the bird at the time as an adult male Caribbean Martin (*P. dominicensis*) and obtained several photographs of the bird using an Olympus D-460 digital camera though Swarovski 10x40 EL binoculars (Fig-

ures 1, 2). During this observation period, the bird was roosting on the roof of the hotel overlooking the pool courtyard and about 25–35 m above us. The hotel is located about 200 m inland from a coastal beach that is developed with hotels for several km, but at the time there was an area of undeveloped thorn scrub habitat behind the hotel and a freshwater wetland, the Bubali wetlands, about one km from the hotel. We left the island the following day and have no further information on the length of the bird's stay.

Discussion

There are six species of *Progne* martin in which males are dark blue above: Caribbean, Purple (*P. subis*), Cuban (*P. cryptoleuca*), Sinaloa (*P. sinaloae*), Gray-breasted (*P. chalybea*), and Southern (*P. modesta*). We eliminated Purple and Southern Martins because in both species males are completely dark below with no white on the undersides (Hilty 2003, Turner and Rose 1989); adult male Cuban Martin likewise shows dark underparts in the field (the white belly feathers are normally concealed) and was thus also eliminated (Garrido and Kirkconnell 2000, Raffaele et al. 1998). Gray-breasted Martin, in which males have a grayish-brown throat and upper chest and gray flanks, was also easily ruled out (Hilty 2003, Howell and Webb 1995, Turner and Rose 1989). Sinaloa Martin, the only *Progne* species other than Caribbean Martin that shows a white belly contrasting with bluish flanks and breast, typically shows a broader area of white in the upper belly/lower breast than Caribbean Martin (Howell and Webb 1995, Ridgely and Tudor 1989). The rather narrow

white belly patch of the Aruba bird appears to us to be most consistent with Caribbean Martin. Geographic distribution also favors Caribbean over Sinaloa Martin in this case.

Caribbean Martin breeds commonly in all the Greater Antilles except Cuba, throughout the Lesser Antilles, and on Tobago (A.O.U. 1998); it normally vacates the breeding range from October through early January, apparently migrating to an unknown wintering location in South America (Frost and Massiah 2001, Murphy and Hayes 2001, Raffaele et al. 1998, Keith 1997, Ridgely and Tudor 1989). A wintering roost of Caribbean Martins discovered and monitored on Barbados in winter 2000–2001 was the first docu-

mented instance of overwintering in the Caribbean Basin (Frost and Massiah 2001), and small numbers have been recorded wintering there every year since the initial discovery (M. Frost, pers. comm.). Our record constitutes the first for Aruba and the first record from the winter period for Aruba, Bonaire, or Curaçao.

Although no previous records exist for this species on Aruba (Rodner et al. 2000), Voous (1983) lists 12 records, including six specimens, of the species from the nearby islands of Curaçao and Bonaire. Within these 12 records are at least three specimen records of Cuban Martin—a taxon Voous (1983) lists as conspecific with Caribbean Martin—and it is unclear how many of the six sight records were unequivocally identified as Caribbean versus Cuban Martin. All of the records for Bonaire and Curaçao summarized by Voous (1983) are from autumn (September–October) or from May. The May records are of particular interest: throughout the breeding range of Caribbean Martin, individuals are



Figure 1. Adult male Caribbean Martin at Divi Village Resort, Oranjestad, Aruba on 16 January 2002. Note the very narrow white underparts bounded by rather broad dark-blue plumage of the sides. The very similar adult male Sinaloa Martin typically shows a broader area of white below. Photograph by Jeffrey V. Wells.



Figure 2. Adult male Caribbean Martin at Divi Village Resort, Oranjestad, Aruba on 16 January 2002. From the side, the bird often looked entirely dark, with just a small area of white visible around the feet. Photograph by Jeffrey V. Wells.

said to return to the breeding grounds in January or February, with eggs often laid by April. However, multiple observations of Caribbean Martins at Trinidad over a period three years by Murphy and Hayes (2001; first confirmed records for Trinidad) fell in the April–May period, except for one from February–April. Perhaps the April and May records refer to laggard first-spring individuals, a phenomenon noted in a number of other migrant bird species, or perhaps the species has a more protracted migration period than is currently known.

It is puzzling that there are no previous records of migrant Caribbean Martins from Aruba, Bonaire, or Curaçao for the January–March period, a time when one would presume the bulk of the population would be returning to the breeding areas. Because the species has been at least occasionally recorded on Curaçao and Bonaire in fall migration (Voous 1983), the absence of reports from late winter/early spring is even more surprising. As we left Aruba shortly after discovering the Caribbean Martin at Oranjestad, we cannot determine whether the bird wintered there or was just roosting on the buildings during a short migration stop-over.

The southern *Progne* species still present enigmas: their field identification is difficult, their taxonomic relationships are unsettled,

their wintering areas in several cases (Cuban and Caribbean Martins) remain unknown, and the phenology of their migrations is poorly understood. The genus clearly deserves further study.

Acknowledgments

We offer thanks to Martin Frost, who provided extensive comments on early drafts of this paper. We extend our gratitude also to the Ithaca Ageless Jazz Band for the opportunity to visit the island, and the Divi Tamarijn Resort for its kind hospitality during our stay.

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