

UPDATE FROM ISLA DE LA PLATA

By: Robert L. Curry

Isla de La Plata is a small island lying about 30 km off the coast of mainland Ecuador. The Island is not associated geologically with the Galápagos, but it shares many of the Archipelago's plant and animal species. Eight years ago, J. Bosco Nowak visited the Island and published a disturbing description of threats to the Island's wildlife (Nowak 1986). On 20 June 1991, I had an opportunity to visit Isla de La Plata for a few hours. Here I report my own observations, and my impressions concerning the Island's current conservation status, from the perspective of an ornithologist with extensive research experience in the Galápagos.

Isla de La Plata, along with smaller Isla Salango and a few other islets, forms one of four sectors of the 35,000 ha Machalilla National Park. The Park, with headquarters situated in the fishing village of Puerto Lopez, Manabí Province, was established in 1979. La Plata, which is nearly 5 km long, roughly 2 km wide, and 167 m in elevation, consists of eroded sedimentary deposits overlying older basaltic lava now exposed at sea level. The Island's vegetation, dominated by xeric shrubs (including *Cordia* and *Croton*) and scattered palo santo trees (*Bursera graveolens*), resembles that of both the mainland coast and the arid lowland zone in the Galápagos. Much of La Plata's woody vegetation, however, has been destroyed through a combination of grazing by goats and cutting by humans, presumably for fuelwood. I was surprised to observe many candelabra cacti (*Cereus* spp.) but no prickly pears (*Opuntia* spp.) though the latter occur along the mainland beaches and scrublands. My visit to La Plata followed the annual wet season, and much of the Island's loose soil was carpeted with recent growth of grasses and some vines.

National Park staff have been active in working towards eradication of goats from La Plata. Vargas, the Guardaparque who accompanied me on the Island, reported that about 30 goats remain on the Island, a dramatic decrease from the 300 estimated by Nowak in 1985; I saw none during my 6-hour visit. Vargas also believes that only a few introduced black rats (*Rattus rattus*), which have caused much

devastation in the Galápagos (e.g., Curry 1985), are present on La Plata. The remaining rats may be held in check by the Island's few feral cats although the several cat scats I examined all seemed to contain eggshell fragments, rather than mammalian hair. I believe eradication of these cats should be considered, but only if the rat population can be controlled by some other means.

For naturalists with experience in the Galápagos, many of La Plata's marine organisms are familiar and intriguing. The Island's small colony of Waved Albatrosses (*Diomedea irrorata*) is particularly notable, because this is the only known breeding locality outside of Galápagos where the breeding is confined to Isla Española. I observed only four albatrosses on La Plata, including one bird incubating an egg and three others occupying likely nesting sites. The Island also supports breeding populations of all three species of boobies native to the Galápagos. During my visit, Blue-footed Boobies (*Sula nebouxii*) were most abundant, with most involved in courtship and a few on nests with eggs. I was surprised to see at least two adult blue-foots perched, as Red-footed Boobies (*S. sula*) often do, above the ground on low branches! Masked Boobies (*S. dactylatra*) were less numerous than blue-foots and were clustered near nesting colonies at both ends of the Island. Most were incubating eggs though many fledged juveniles from the previous breeding period were also present. The Guardaparques told me more than 30 birds were nesting at the Island's east end, but I did not observe any Red-footed Boobies in this area. Complementing the Galapagean scene were a colony of nesting Magnificent Frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*), three resting Galápagos sea lions (*Zalophus californianus wollebaeki*), whose presence on La Plata was noted by Nowak (1986), and many sally lightfoot crabs (*Grapsus grapsus*) dotting the wave-washed lava.

My own primary reason for visiting the Island was to observe its resident Long-tailed Mockingbirds (*Mimus longicaudatus platensis*). I was pleased to find a thriving mockingbird population on La Plata. The birds I saw all appeared to be in adult plumage—

though I am not certain if the race endemic to La Plata retains small breast spots until the first post-juvenile molt as do all four species of Galápagos mockingbirds (*Nesomimus* spp.; Curry and Grant 1990) and most other mimids. The La Plata mockingbirds appeared to be living in territorial groups of four to five individuals. Such observations are consistent with data collected on the mainland where apparently two or more females sometimes lay their eggs jointly in a single nest (Marchant 1960). This aggregation of eggs happens in *Nesomimus*, on both Genovesa and Champion, but only when two or more females live together in the same cooperatively breeding social group (Curry and Grant 1990). Therefore, it appears that Long-tailed Mockingbirds are also group-territorial cooperative breeders. The La Plata birds also seem to engage in an inordinate amount of singing. Their songs have a liquid quality that differs from those of any of the species of *Nesomimus*. To my ear, the La Plata songs also seem to include phrases that may be copied from other species on the Island.

The Island supports only a few other landbirds. I was surprised to find that the most abundant species was the Collared Warbling-finch (*Poospiza hispaniolensis*), a bird I had not encountered previously during two trips to nearby coastal areas of the Ecuadorian mainland. The black-and-white males and brown-and-white females of this species seem to fill the niche occupied by the Small or Medium Ground Finches (*Geospiza fuliginosa* and *G. fortis*) on most Islands in the Galápagos. At the time of my visit, they were feeding in flocks of up to about 20 individuals in open, grassy areas and under shrubs and brush. Might not this population exhibit the extreme degree of morphological and behavioral variation typical of landbirds on depauperate islands? I suspect the species would be an excellent subject of further study. Other landbirds I observed included many Black and Turkey Vultures (*Coragyps atratus* and *Cathartes aura*), about a dozen Eared Doves (*Zenaidura macroura*), one pair of Vermilion Flycatchers (*Pyrocephalus rubinus*), two Grey-and-white Tyrannulets (*Phaeomyias leucospodia*), and several Southern Beardless-Tyrannulets (*Campostoma obsoletum*).

Isla de La Plata is an interesting and

special component of one of Ecuador's unique National Parks. I am encouraged that the Island's conservation status seems to have improved since Nowak's visit in 1985. Plans are underway to establish a scientific research station, through renovation of an abandoned fishing lodge, on the north side of the Island. Such a facility will serve as an excellent base for future protection and research activities, to be conducted by the Park staff and by a group of young conservation ecologists based in Guayaquil known as "Semilla de la Vida."

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