

A record of Cuban/Caribbean Martin (*Progne cryptoleuca/dominicensis*) for the Bahamas

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white below other than strong brownish tones on the throat, breast, and sides (Figures 1-3). The white plumage below extended well up the belly, approaching the chest and contrasting sharply with the dark breast and sides, although the demarcation appeared to show irregular borders, especially when the birds were perched, somewhat recalling Brown-chested Martin (*P. tapera*) (Figures 2, 3). In flight, several birds (Figure 1) showed an irregular border between breast and belly that appeared to be the result of dusky shaft streaks or shaft smudges, and the undertail coverts also showed a few such smudges (Figure 1). The throat of several birds was noted to be slightly paler but not white (Figure 3). The entire underwing and the upperparts appeared to be dark brown in the field.

At the time, Hayes suspected that the birds

could be Caribbean Martins, a species familiar to him from Tobago Island. The white underparts clearly ruled out male Purple Martin and male Cuban Martin (*P. cryptoleuca*), and the contrast of the white underparts with the dark throat, chest, and sides ruled out female Purple Martin. He did not consider in the field the possibility of female Cuban Martin (a species unfamiliar to him), which is very similar to female Caribbean Martin, or the less likely possibility of Sinaloa Martin (*P. sinaloae*) of western Mexico.

Discussion

Identification of martins in the field can be challenging in many cases and may not be possible in some cases on present knowledge. Field separation of female Caribbean Martin from female Cuban Martin is reportedly possible based on the underpart pattern:

Abstract

This paper presents documentation of three female martins (*Progne* species) found in May 1997 at White Cay, Exumas, Bahamas; their identification is uncertain, but Caribbean Martin (*P. dominicensis*) and Cuban Martin (*P. cryptoleuca*) would appear to be the most likely species involved. The state of field identification of female *Progne* is reviewed.

Field Encounter

At about 0800 on 3 May 1997 on White Cay (also called Sandy Cay), at the southern terminus of the Exumas Islands in the Bahamas, W. K. Hayes noted three female-type martins (*Progne* species) in the snags of a dead *Casuarina* tree above the tent in which he was camping. He was there during an extended study of the endangered endemic White Cay Iguana (*Cyclura rileyi cristata*). He immediately recognized the birds as martins but knew that they could not be female Purple Martins (*P. subis*). He studied them at very close range (about 5 m) for about 10 minutes and asked co-worker Carl Fuhri to take a series of photographs (Figures 1-3). During this time, the birds flew about and returned repeatedly to the same tree. Their rolling vocalizations were obviously those of martins.

Hayes noted that all three martins were



Figure 1. Female Cuban/Caribbean Martin, White Cay, Exumas, Bahamas on 3 May 1997. Some references suggest that female Cuban Martins show more extensive pale plumage in the breast than female Caribbean Martins, and that the contrast between dark breast and pale belly is more starkly demarcated in Cuban, more blended in Caribbean. These features may suggest an identification of the White Cay birds as Cuban Martins, but on present knowledge a certain identification may not be possible. A more remote possibility for occurrence in the Bahamas, female Sinaloa Martin closely resembles female Cuban/Caribbean but is smaller. Photograph by Carl Fuhri.

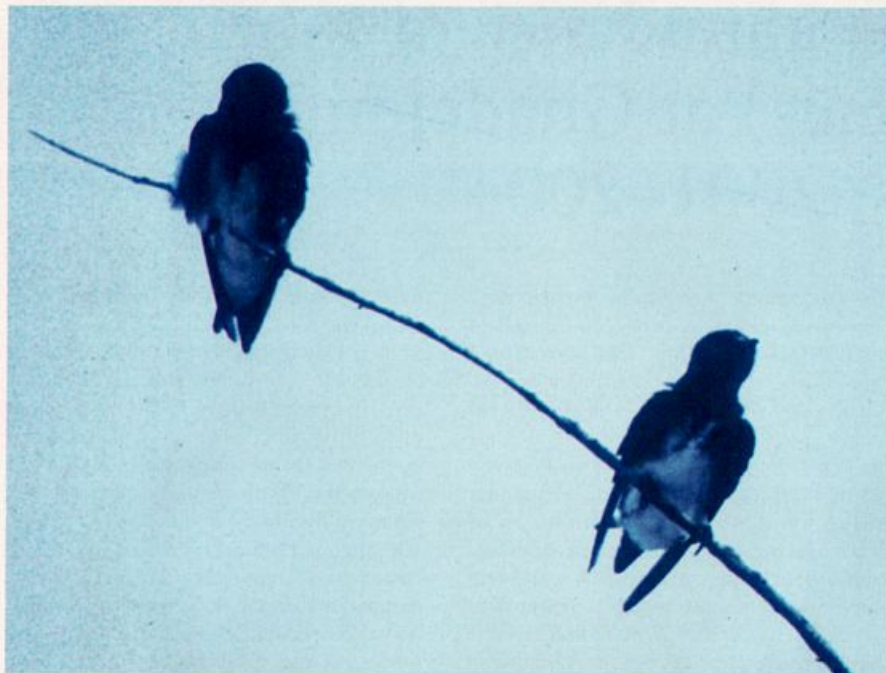


Figure 2. Female Cuban/Caribbean Martins, White Cay, Exumas, Bahamas on 3 May 1997. The incursion of white from upper belly into the lower breast was clearly visible on perched birds; this feature may be more typical of female Cuban than of female Caribbean Martin, but more study of specimens and live birds is needed to determine variation in this character. Photograph by Carl Fuhr.

in female Cuban Martin, the white of the abdomen extends farther into the breast than in Caribbean, in which the dusky brown breast extends farther down the breast; the dark breast of female Caribbean is also supposed to blend more gradually into the pale belly, rather than being starkly set off, as in Cuban (Raffaele et al. 1998); and the presence of dark shaft streaks/smudges in otherwise white plumage below (e.g., undertail coverts, breast feathers) may also support identification as Cuban (Turner and Rose 1989), but this point is not clearly adumbrated in the literature. Also, the upperparts of female Cuban Martins are said to be darker than those of female Caribbean Martins (Turner and Rose 1989). The underpart pattern of the three martins on White Cay—both the distribution of dark and pale plumage and its contrast—would appear more like Cuban than Caribbean Martin, at least based on the limited discussion of this identification problem in the literature.

In researching the present report, A. W. White and Richard C. Banks studied specimens of Cuban and Caribbean Martins, particularly females collected within the breeding range during breeding season, at the U. S. National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian). They measured and/or compared the specimens' wing dimensions, extension of the undertail coverts in relation to the rectrix tips, throat color, and the extent of the dark flanks along the white belly. In these attributes they were unable to find significant or consistent differences between the two species that could be used to identify the birds in the photographs taken at White Cay.

Geography is of little help in speculation on the identification of these martins: White Cay lies less than 400 km from the nearest breeding area of Cuban Martin and less than 500 km from the nearest breeding area of Caribbean Martin. Cuban Martin has never been reported from the Bahamas, but Caribbean Martin has been reported from the

southern Bahamas on Great Inagua, Grand Turk, and Mayaguana Islands (Raffaele et al. 1998); none of these reports has been critically reviewed by the Bahamas Bird Records Committee (A. W. White, pers. comm.), and at least some may refer to Cuban Martin. The very similar but smaller Sinaloa Martin, often combined with Cuban and Caribbean Martins as a single species, Snowy-bellied Martin (*P. dominicensis sensu lato*; see Turner and Rose 1989), has a broader area of white below, particularly in males, but females are reportedly very similar to female Caribbean Martins (Ridgely and Tudor 1989). Sinaloa Martin would seem less likely based on geography, but there is a published report of the species from Bermuda (Raffaele et al. 1998), and so it should be considered a possibility, if a remote one, in this case.

Acknowledgments

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Literature cited

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Figure 3. Female Cuban/Caribbean Martin, White Cay, Exumas, Bahamas on 3 May 1997. The slightly paler throat is a feature typical of both female Cuban and female Caribbean Martins. Photograph by Carl Fuhr.