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Important Bird Areas AMERICAS

# HONDURAS

David L. Anderson & Christian Devenish





## Country facts at a glance

Area:	112,088 km <sup>2</sup>
Population (2007):	7,483,763
Capital:	Tegucigalpa
Altitude:	0–2870 m
<b>Number of IBAs:</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Total IBA area:</b>	<b>2,160,233 ha</b>
<b>IBA coverage of land area:</b>	<b>18%</b>
Total number of birds:	717
Globally threatened birds:	7
Globally threatened birds in IBAs:	7
Country endemics:	1

## General introduction

Honduras is located in northern Central America, with coasts on both the Caribbean and Pacific Ocean. The Caribbean coast is the more extensive of the two, measuring slightly more than 650 km, and possesses several small island groups in its offshore waters. The shorter Pacific coast, at about 120 km, makes up part of the Gulf of Fonseca, shared with El Salvador and Nicaragua. Honduras borders Guatemala to the northwest, El Salvador to the southwest and Nicaragua to the southeast. Honduras is the second largest of the seven Central American countries, after Nicaragua.

Honduras is a democratic constitutional republic with the popularly elected president serving as chief of state as well as heading the executive branch of government. The single chamber of congress, Congreso Nacional, is made up of 128 seats, allocated according to the proportion of votes received by the corresponding party's presidential candidate. The economy is largely agricultural with bananas, pineapples and coffee as principal exports; however, tourism has recently become a major factor in the economy. Other products include timber, zinc, lead and silver. The country is divided into 18 administrative departments.

Honduras has nine indigenous or Afro-American cultures, representing approximately 13% of the population, living in 15 of the country's 18 departments. Ethnic communities can be grouped into Mesoamerican, Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean lineages. The largest ethnic group with a population of more than 400,000 are the Lencas, made up of more than 1000 communities. The largest Afro-Caribbean group is the Garífuna people, who have lived for more than 200 years along many parts of the Caribbean coast and the Bay Islands.

Honduras is a mountainous country with approximately 75% of the country's area having slopes of more than 22%. The country's highest point is Cerro Las Minas at 2870 m in Celaque National Park in the western mountains. In addition to the interior highlands, narrow lowland plains on both coasts and the vast Mosquitia lowlands in far eastern Honduras complete the country's topographic makeup. A depression running from the Caribbean to the Gulf of Fonseca separates the mountainous areas into east and west mountain ranges or cordilleras, as well as providing a convenient transportation route across the country. Island territories include coral islands such as Cayos Cochinos, Cayos Zapotillos and Cayos de la Mosquitia as well as the larger Bay Islands in the Caribbean. Islands of volcanic origin, the largest of which are Zacate Grande and Isla del Tigre, are located in the Gulf of Fonseca. The Swan Islands, a pair of small islands located 200 km off Honduras's north coast, complete the country's island topography.

Climate is generally subtropical in the lowlands and temperate in higher areas. The northern coast is relatively more humid than the central and southern regions. Annual precipitation varies from 800 mm in the southwest of El Paraíso department to 3400 mm in northeast Mosquitia, bordering Nicaragua. Annual average temperatures vary between 16°C in mountainous regions to 24°C in the interior valleys and Caribbean coast.

Much forest still remains throughout the country, principally at higher elevations and in the Mosquitia lowlands, but this is often highly fragmented by slash-and-burn agriculture. Major ecosystems are tropical broadleaved forest, including montane and dry forests, coniferous forests and mangroves. More than 7500 species of vascular plants have been reported for Honduras, including approximately 150 endemic species. Additionally, Honduras has 36 endemic amphibians, 14 endemic reptiles, three endemic fish, a figure which will rise to at least 10 shortly (W. Matamoros pers. comm.) and three endemic mammals.

The country is included in two biodiversity hotspots (Mittermeier *et al.* 2005), the whole of continental Honduras is in the Mesoamerica Hotspot and the Swan Islands in the Caribbean Islands Hotspot. Serious threats to biodiversity in Honduras come from deforestation due to agriculture and logging and illegal trafficking of wildlife. In fact, it has been estimated that 80,000 ha of natural areas are being lost each year (DAPVS 2008) as a result of population growth and unmanaged exploitation of natural resources that arise when natural habitats are cleared for agriculture, cattle ranching and prawn farming. Another serious threat to most protected areas is the illegal trafficking of hardwoods. This is particularly severe in eastern Honduras, most notably the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (Box 1).

## Conservation and protected area system



Honduras has more than 70 protected areas with legal status, and a further 30 have been proposed, awaiting review. Included in the National Protected Areas System are 17 national parks, created between 1980 and 2007. Legally constituted areas represent more than 17% of the country's area, or 19,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Honduran parks also make up part of the international conservation initiative, the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System. Other legally recognized protected area categories include biological reserves, wildlife refuges, forest reserves and marine parks.

Honduras has one Biosphere Reserve, Río Plátano (Box 1), covering an area of 800,000 ha of primarily lowland rainforest, pine savanna, and coastal lagoons, with some submontane pine forests at its southern extent. The reserve lies mainly in Gracias a Dios department, with smaller portions in Olancho and Colón. The reserve is also a World Heritage Site due to its biophysical as well as cultural and historical characteristics. There are six Ramsar sites in Honduras (Barras de Cuero y Salado, Laguna de Bacalar, Jeanette Kawas National Park, Punta Izopo National Park, Sistema de Humedales de la Zona Sur de Honduras, Subcuenca del Lago de Yojoa) nominated between 1993 and 2005, totaling an area of 223,320 ha.

Since 1991, the Protected Areas and Wildlife Department of what is now the National Conservation and Forestry Institute (ICF) has been responsible for regulations on natural resources and protected area management. Internal legislation concerning biodiversity has recently centered on the 1990 government decree prohibiting the capture and sale of wildlife within Honduras. However, this norm has been criticized for contributing to illegal trafficking

of wildlife through neighboring countries, especially the sparsely-populated border region with Nicaragua. Currently one of the Protected Areas and Wildlife Department's priorities is to update wildlife regulations.

The Protected Areas and Wildlife Department currently lies within and is governed by the larger National Conservation and Forestry Institute. This conflict of interests (in the sense that logging is perceived as profitable, but conservation is not), as well as a greater focus on the profitability of timber, has fueled a grass-roots movement toward conservation NGOs in the country. Local NGOs provide the de facto management of most protected areas in Honduras at all levels, from biological inventories, to writing management plans and proposing legislation at the national level.

A National Biodiversity Strategy was published in 2000, coordinated by the Biodiversity Section of the Natural Resources and Environment Department. The strategy aims to ensure the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and foster civil society participation in the conservation of natural resources. Ex situ conservation is focused on herbaria, zoos, botanical gardens, breeding programs and seed banks.

With regard to international treaties, Honduras is party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (ratified in 1995), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (and Kyoto Protocol), Convention on Migratory Species and the World Heritage Convention, among others.

### Box 1

### The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

The Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is one of the most important biological reserves in Central America. In size it measures 800,000 ha. Within this area are found primary lowland rain forest, pine savanna and coastal lagoons. This immense area is a last refuge to many threatened bird and mammal species, such as Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambiguus*) and Harpy Eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), jaguar (*Panthera onca*), West Indian

manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) and giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*). It is also home to three indigenous groups, the Garífuna of Afro-Caribbean origin, and the Miskito and Pech Indians. Illegal logging, poaching, immigration, and attempts to convert northern portions of the reserve to oil palm plantations all threaten its integrity and continued existence.



Miskito/Pech Indian village of Las Marias in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (HN008). Photo: Vicente Murphy



## Ornithological importance

Honduras occupies a keystone biogeographic position in Central America where components of North America, South America, and Middle America overlap (Monroe 1968), a fact reflected strongly in the country's avifauna, now standing at about 720 species. Roughly 50 bird species whose origins and centers of distribution are in South America reach their northern distributional limits in the lowland rain forests of the Honduran Mosquitia (Howell & Webb 1995, Bonta & Anderson 2002, Anderson *et al.* 2004). This lists includes many quintessential rain forest species like White-fronted Nunbird (*Monasa morphoeus*), Thicket Antpitta (*Hylopezus dives*), Snowy Cotinga (*Carpodectes nitidus*), Chestnut-backed Antbird (*Myrmeciza exsul*), and many more too numerous to mention. It is also here that ant-following flocks and large canopy and understory flocks, so typical of South American sites, are common yet drop off drastically in both occurrence and diversity farther north. Also in the Mosquitia of eastern Honduras and neighboring Nicaragua, pines reach their southernmost natural extent. One finds at least 13 nesting species in these forests that are more characteristic of conifer forests and open spaces in North America. These would include Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*), and Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*), among others.

Nearctic-neotropical migrants are another group characteristic of North America with a strong presence in Honduras. Nearly 200 migrant species, about 25% of Honduras's total avifauna, winter in or migrate through Honduras every year, many of which are declining, like the Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*), or endangered, like the Golden-cheeked Warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*). Indeed, Honduras appears to be at the center

of the wintering distribution for this latter species (Rappole *et al.* 1999). Northern migrants are in addition to typically Nearctic species whose southern breeding limits fall in Honduras. Finally, Honduras contains species whose origin and greatest diversity lie in Middle America. Most noteworthy of this category are the motmots, perhaps the group most emblematic of Middle American rain forests. Seven species in all six genera of the Momotidae are found in Honduras, more species than any other country. Another group with several species of Middle American origin are the mountain-gem hummingbirds, found in cloud forests in the region and for which Honduras is particularly well represented (McGuire *et al.* 2007).

Honduras is also important ornithologically because it retains so much primary forest coverage. Pico Bonito National Park, at 107,090 ha, has primary forest from almost sea level to 2480 m elevation. This provides an important forest corridor between lowlands and highlands, something that is increasingly scarce in Central America. The lowland broadleaf forests of the combined Honduran and Nicaraguan Mosquitia measure 33,900 km<sup>2</sup> (Anderson *et al.* 2004). Forests of this magnitude are of immeasurable importance to many of Central America's most highly endangered species. These forests constitute one of the last refuges in Central America for significant populations of Harpy Eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), Crested Eagle (*Morphnus guianensis*), Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambiguus*) and Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*), not to mention jaguars (*Panthera onca*), giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*), and Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*). Large cracids, drastically reduced by hunting throughout most of Central America, are still abundant in these lowland forests.

### New localities found for Honduran Emerald

Box 2

The Honduran Emerald (*Amazilia luciae*) is Honduras' only endemic bird and one of the most critically endangered of the Americas. Current population estimates are between 500 and 2000 breeding pairs. Deforestation of its dry tropical forest habitat had reduced its range to two arid interior valleys in the departments of Olancho and Yoro, where forest patches measuring just 5–250 ha remain, 99% of which are on privately owned land. However, a recent expedition has found the species at six new sites in Santa Barbara in western Hon-

duras which may also warrant IBA status. Despite previous efforts, it had not been reported there since 1935.

Conservation initiatives by Fundación Pico Bonito include the establishment of the first reserve for the species, Honduran Emerald Reserve in Yoro, public education and attempts to purchase private land in order to create other reserves.



Thorn scrub in Valle de Aguán (HN006). Photos: Vicente Murphy

Habitat heterogeneity is another factor important in influencing Honduras's great diversity of birds. Honduras is a mountainous country with a great extent of coniferous forests, yet has a humid coastal plain along the Caribbean north coast and a more arid plain along the Pacific coast.



Near Threatened Resplendent Quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*) chicks in La Muralla National Park (HN011). Photo: Vicente Murphy

Honduras's interior valleys are quite arid, and many are covered in low thorn forests. There are large coastal lagoons along the Caribbean coast, and low islands off both coasts. Each of these many ecoregions possesses its own distinct avifauna, a fact that increases the overall complexity of Honduras's avifauna as a whole.

Honduras has seven threatened species of birds. The Honduran Emerald (*Amazilia luciae*) is Critically Endangered (Box 2), two species are Endangered, Great Green Macaw (*Ara ambiguus*) and Golden-cheeked Warbler (*Dendroica chrysoparia*) and four Vulnerable. A further 15 species are classified as Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2007). Additionally, Honduras has 23 restricted-range species, distributed within three Endemic Bird Areas: North Central American Pacific slope (EBA 017), North Central American highlands (EBA 018), Central American Caribbean slope (EBA 019) and three secondary areas. A further species, Three-wattled Bellbird (*Procnias tricarunculatus*), has a limited breeding range, including Sierra de Agalta National Park, even though its overall distributional range is much larger.

IBA overview



The IBA process in Honduras is still at an early stage, with an initial identification of proposed sites only just having finished. Further stages of the process will include validation with the wider ornithological community. In total, 23 IBAs have been proposed for 13 administrative departments of the country, with a total area of 2,160,233 ha or approximately 18% of the country's area (Table 1, Figure 1). IBAs range from 800 to almost 800,000 ha in area.

All but one of Honduras's 23 IBAs were proposed under A1 criterion and include all seven threatened birds present in the country. When including Near Threatened species this drops to 18 of 22 species or 82% represented in IBAs. The four Near Threatened species not confirmed for any IBA are Solitary Eagle (*Harpyhaliaetus solitarius*), Black Catbird (*Melanoptila glabrirostris*), Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*)<sup>1</sup> and Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*). Golden-winged Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) is confirmed for the highest number of IBAs (14) and White-crowned Pigeon (*Patagioenas leucocephala*) and Vitelline Warbler (*Dendroica vitellina*) have only been confirmed for one IBA each.

Twenty IBAs were proposed under criterion A2, including all 23 restricted-range species present in Honduras represented in one or more IBA. Bar-winged Oriole (*Icterus maculialatus*) may occur in what would be the

southernmost limits of its distribution in the west of the country but its status has not been confirmed as yet for North Central American highlands (EBA018) in Honduras.

The same applies to the Madrean Highlands Biome. Twenty IBAs were proposed under criterion A3 and five IBAs were proposed under criterion A4, all of which come under A4i. In the Río Plátano IBA, some 8000 Boat-billed Herons (*Cochlearius cochlearius*) have been recorded.

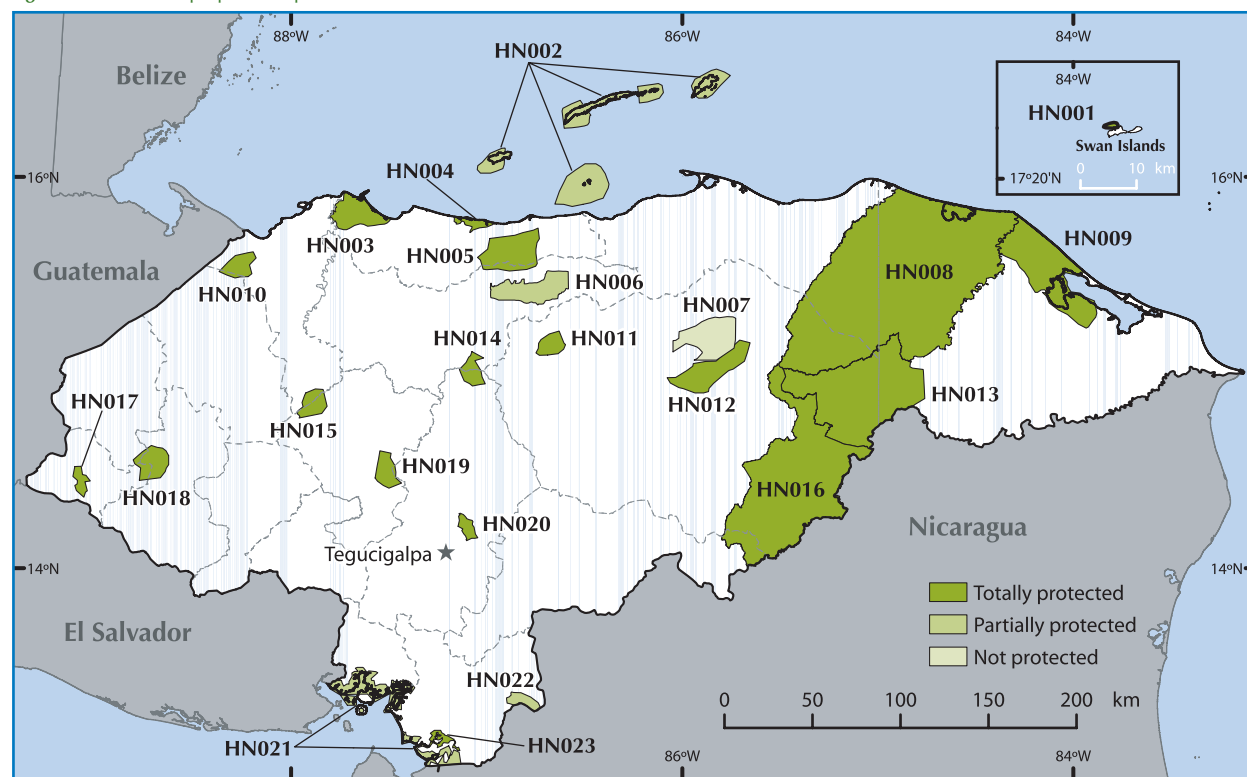
In Honduras, 74% of IBAs are totally protected, including 11 of Honduras's 17 national parks as well as the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (Box 1). Only one IBA is without protection status in its entirety. Four IBAs are also Ramsar sites, two on the Caribbean coast (Cuero y Salado and Jeanette Kawas National Park) and a further two (El Jicarito and Chismuyo/ Coyolito) are included in the Ramsar site "Sistema de Humedales de la Zona Sur de Honduras" in the Gulf of Fonseca on the Pacific side.

Principal habitat types are submontane and montane pine forests, cloud forests, lowland rain forest, dry tropical forests and wetlands on both coasts. Three IBAs also include significant portions of artificial terrestrial landscapes.



Dugout canoe or pipante on the río Plátano with Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in the distance. Photo: Vicente Murphy

Figure 1. Location of proposed Important Bird Areas in Honduras



<sup>1</sup> This species has been downlisted to LC in the 2008 IUCN Red List.

Table 1. Proposed Important Bird Areas in Honduras

IBA code	IBA name	Adm unit	Area (ha)	A1				A2	A3	A4				
				CR	EN	VU	NT			A4i	A4ii	A4iii	A4iv	
HN001	Swan Islands	Islas de la Bahía	800			1	1	X						
HN002	Islas de la Bahía y Cayos Cochinos	Islas de la Bahía	121,394			1	2	X	X					
HN003	Jeanette Kawas	Atlántida	37,996				2		X	X				
HN004	Cuero y Salado	Atlántida	7,948				2							
HN005	Pico Bonito	Atlántida, Yoro	56,473		1	3	5	X	X					
HN006	Valle de Aguán	Yoro	49,302	1				X	X					
HN007	Valle de Agalta	Olancho	55,948	1			1	X	X					
HN008	Río Plátano	Colón, Gracias a Dios, Olancho	797,954		1	3	5	X	X	X	X			
HN009	Laguna Caratasca	Gracias a Dios	133,750										X	
HN010	Cusuco	Cortés	17,908	1	1	4		X	X					
HN011	La Muralla	Olancho	14,941			1	4	X	X					
HN012	Sierra de Agalta	Olancho	51,837			4	5	X	X					
HN013	Tawahka	Gracias a Dios, Olancho	252,079	1	3	4	X	X	X					
HN014	Montaña de Yoro	Yoro	15,468	1	2	5	X	X						
HN015	Cerro Azul Meambar	Cortés	17,872	1	2	5	X	X						
HN016	Parque Nacional Patuca	Olancho	376,448	1	1	5	X	X	X	X				
HN017	Güisayote	Nuevo Ocotepeque	8,545			1	4	X	X					
HN018	Celaque	Copán	26,639	1	1	4	X	X						
HN019	Comayagua	Comayagua	18,273			1	2	X	X					
HN020	La Tigra	Francisco Morazán	8,768	1	1	4	X	X						
HN021	Chismuyo/Coyolito	Valle	72,580				2	X	X					
HN022	La Botija	Valle	10,413				2	X	X					
HN023	El Jicarito	Choluteca	6,897				2	X	X	X				

## Further information

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For information on trigger species at each IBA, see individual site accounts at BirdLife's Data Zone: [www.birdlife.org/datazone/sites/](http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sites/)  
**COMING SOON!**

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Near Threatened female  
Resplendent Quetzal  
(*Pharomachrus mocinno*).  
Photo: Vicente Murphy