Project Update: June 2011

Tropical Andes cloud-forests are the most species rich area of the world and a priority area for biodiversity conservation. Sadly, these forests are vanishing rapidly due to agricultural expansion and climatic change. As a result many species are threatened, including several frugivorous birds. These birds play a fundamental role on the fruit removal of tree species and are key organisms for the natural dynamic of the forests. This project focuses in assessing the strength of the interaction between frugivorous birds and trees and the influence of anthropogenic effects on this relationship in Venezuelan cloud-forests. These objectives are accomplished by documenting the foraging behavior of frugivorous bird in cloud forests of different size. This is priority information for conservation because of our lack of knowledge about this ecological process in Venezuela.

Fieldwork so far has consisted of 6 months of intensive work on Altos de Pipe, Miranda State and Yacambú National Park, Lara State. Data collection has been conducted in six field trips to both sites from January to June 2011 and an additional assessment before data collection was performed in December 2010. Permissions from the Ministry of Environment are granted as well as permissions and collaboration of INPARQUES, the institution in charge of Yacambú National Park. Surveys have consisted of 12 weeks of intensive work in both locations (1 week per month in each site) on which I have conducted point-count surveys and observations of the foraging behavior of frugivorous birds. Simultaneously, I have been monitoring the fruiting phenology of six species of trees and collecting botanical samples to identify attractive tree species for birds. Fieldwork has been specially rewarded because of the documentation of the foraging behavior of poorly known species of frugivorous birds as the threatened Blood-eared parrot (*Pyrrhura haemotis*), Venezuelan parakeet (*P. emma*), wattled guan (*Aburria aburri*) and golden-breasted fruiteater (*Pipreola aureopectus*). Because some of these species are considered as data deficient species on the national red list, these data about their natural history are especially important to promote their conservation in Venezuela. Preliminary analyses indicated that two tree species are capturing the greatest part of bird interactions in both sites and could be considered magnet trees because of the number of small passerine birds attracted. In addition, several audio records of frugivorous bird species have been uploaded at Xeno-canto website to contribute to the knowledge of song repertoire of Neotropical birds. On the other hand, my project has been also promoting the enhancement of local capacities.

The project has beneficed of the participation as field assistants of young Venezuelan students from the University of Carabobo and Zulia which are working with cloud forest animals or have participated voluntarily on the protection of Yacambú National Park. During fieldwork they received a short training on botanical collection and tree identification. Also, a workshop is planned to be conducted in October 2011 at Regional Direction of INPARQUES with the personal not only from Yacambú National Park but also from the closer Dinira National Park which also supports extensive areas of cloud forest in Lara State. During the next months we are going to work in didactic plates and graphic material for the workshop and fieldwork is going to continue according to the schedule. Also a scientific presentation about the project has been submitted for the Neotropical Ornithological Congress as part of the result extension.