



Wood Thrush
Photo: Paul Reeves

Cerro San Gil Reserve

Project title: Cerro San Gil Reserve

Location: Guatemala

Coordinates: 15°40'19.54"N 88°41'33.73"W

Size: 556 acres

Grant Amount: \$40,000

Date: 2021

Partners: American Bird Conservancy and FUNDAECO

Summary and Background:

American Bird Conservancy was founded in 1994 with a mission to conserve wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. With an emphasis on achieving results and working in partnerships, we take on the greatest problems facing birds today, innovating and building on rapid advancements in science to halt extinctions, protect habitats, eliminate threats, and build capacity for bird conservation. Over the past 25 years ABC has helped to conserve and manage

7.6 million acres of habitat in the U.S., as well as protect more than one million acres of habitat in Latin America and the Caribbean for resident and migratory bird species alike. In addition, we have helped restore habitat by planting over six million trees and shrubs. ABC is headquartered in The Plains, VA, and has 87 full-time employees in field locations throughout the U.S. We proudly work with local partners in our projects.

Detailed description of the project:

The Caribbean coast of Guatemala is one of the most diverse ecosystems in the Western hemisphere, but this has not spared it from the many threats facing Central American ecosystems. Population growth in the area has encouraged encroachment on, and subsequent deforestation of, the unique rain forest landscape that thousands of flora and fauna call home. If we are to preserve the forest, which represents a key location for migratory and overwintering North American birds, then it is essential that we protect the remnants of these pristine ecosystems and their associated watersheds.

The Caribbean coastal region of Guatemala extends from Belize to Honduras and encompasses several unique and isolated mountains with elevations up to 1,200 meters. The landscape is dominated by rainforest vegetation that is complemented by a diverse mosaic of habitats that include lowland coastal forests, rare dwarf mangroves, wetlands, and numerous streams and rivers. The variety of ecosystems has given rise to a wealth of biodiversity in the region, and has also created important stopover and wintering habitat for at least 153 neotropical migratory birds. This area is also considered a vital link in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor and the Caribbean migratory flyway of Central America. For these reasons, ABC has defined this area as a high priority “BirdScape” called the Conservation Coast. ABC’s BirdScape initiative is geared to identifying important landscapes and scaling up habitat protection and management for migratory birds.

More than 65% of the forests in the Conservation Coast BirdScape have been cleared for cattle ranching, banana and oil palm plantations, short cycle crops such as corn, and subsistence agriculture. Population growth in local communities and the ensuing encroachment of forested areas is an important deforestation driver. ABC and our Guatemalan partner, FUNDAECO, have been working together since 2012 to create and expand five protected areas through land acquisition. In total, these lands account for 11,262 acres of core habitat for migratory birds, and include Sierra Caral, Cerro San Gil, Punta Manabique, Rio Sarstún, and Sierra Santa Cruz.

ABC is requesting funding from the Tropical Forest Forever Fund to support FUNDAECO with the expansion of the Cerro San Gil Protected Area through the acquisition of 556 acres of forested habitat on a parcel known as Tameja Mountain. To date FUNDAECO has acquired over 30 parcels within the Cerro San Gil Protected Area. The proposed land acquisition will effectively expand the protection of the Core Zone of the Cerro San Gil Protected Area, creating an important corridor across the altitudinal gradients of the Cerro San Gil Reserve, between the higher altitudes (1,267 meters) and the Tameja River lower watershed.

This acquisition will advance the Cerro San Gil Management Plan (or “Master Plan”), which was prepared by FUNDAECO and has been approved by the National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP) in Guatemala. This Master Plan provides general guidelines for the management of the National Protected Area. While Guatemalan legislation has designated Cerro San Gil as a National Protected Area, there have been no resources provided directly for its protection. FUNDAECO has taken on responsibility to secure lands within the protected area for their conservation.

The unique rainforest of Cerro San Gil contains almost 50% of the total biodiversity of the country, including 54% of vertebrate species, 56% of amphibian species, 48% of reptile species, and 67% of bird species. Because of its topography and geological history, Cerro San Gil also has high levels of endemism in its flora and fauna, especially in the lowlands of the Tameja and Las Escobas watersheds. In addition, Cerro San Gil contains at least 84 species of mammals; some of these species need large tracts of forests and/or natural habitat to ensure their survival, including the Jaguar (*Panthera onca*), and Tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*). The few studies carried out in the region have found endemic species of amphibians, trees, palms, and insects, thus confirming the importance of this forested remnant at the national and regional levels.

With 423 species of birds identified, Cerro San Gil is registered as an Important Bird Area (IBA) and is a haven for resident and migratory birds in Caribbean Guatemala, including the Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*). This acquisition advances FUNDAECO’s and ABC’s long-term strategy of preserving stopover and wintering habitats within the Conservation Coast BirdScape. It is especially important to note that a long-term bird monitoring site is located in the area. This site has been surveyed annually for over 28 years through mist-netting and point counts.

Finally, this particular property has direct access via dirt road, making it accessible to visiting birders. FUNDAECO has a burgeoning tourism operation catering to birders, cruise ship tourists who come to the region via a port (Puerto Barrios), and in-country adventure tourists. This site has the opportunity to expand their tourism offerings, providing important dollars for reserve management. Similarly, the property has an existing communications tower, making it a potential site for expanding the network of radio-telemetry based Motus stations in Central America. ABC is currently working with FUNDAECO to install four Motus station in the Sierra Santa Cruz Protected Area. The Motus Wildlife Tracking System is an international collaborative research network that uses coordinated, automated radio telemetry to facilitate research and education on the ecology and conservation of migratory animals. The chance to expand the network, thereby making communication between researchers easier and faster, is an attractive benefit of conservation projects like this.

List of neotropical bird species using the project site (overwinter or during migration):

- Swallow-tailed Kite
- Swainson's Hawk
- Broad-winged Hawk
- Great-crested Flycatcher
- Eastern Wood-Pewee
- Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
- Philadelphia Vireo
- Blue-gray Gnatcatcher
- Wood Thrush
- Swainson's Thrush
- Gray Catbird
- Yellow Warbler
- Chestnut-sided Warbler
- Magnolia Warbler
- Black-throated Green Warbler
- Bay-breasted Warbler
- Cerulean Warbler
- Golden-winged Warbler
- Tennessee Warbler
- Yellow-throated Warbler
- Black-and-white Warbler
- American Redstart
- Worm-eating Warbler
- Ovenbird
- Northern Waterthrush
- Kentucky Warbler
- Hooded Warbler
- Prothonotary Warbler
- Canada Warbler
- Summer Tanager
- Orchard Oriole
- Baltimore Oriole

List of other bird species of concern or focus:

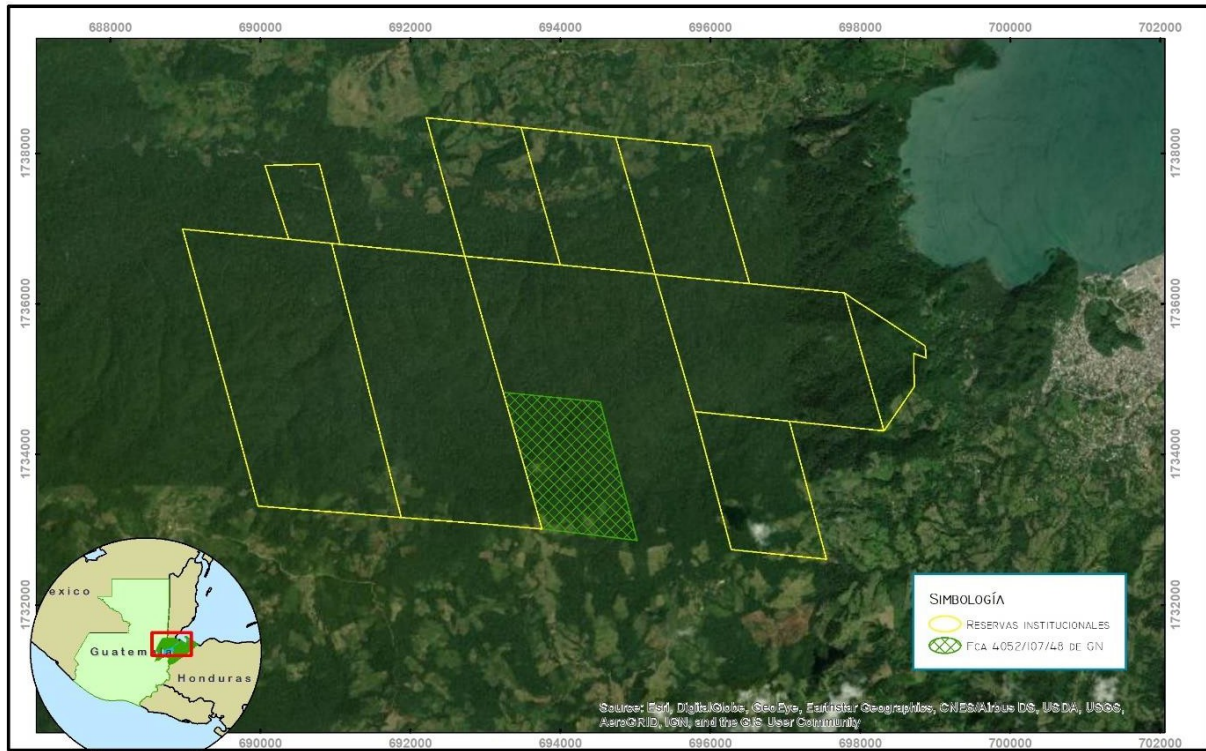
- Great Curassow
- Black and White Hawk Eagle
- Solitary Eagle
- Crested Eagle
- Keel-billed Motmot

Budget of the project:

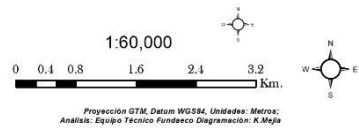
The entire purchase price for the 556-acre property is \$227,272. ABC is requesting funding to help FUNDAECO make an initial down payment for the property. ABC and our local partner will then be able to take immediate control of the property under an agreement with the property owner that will allow the balance of the property to be paid off over three years.

Funding secured so far: \$10,000 has been secured from a private donor.

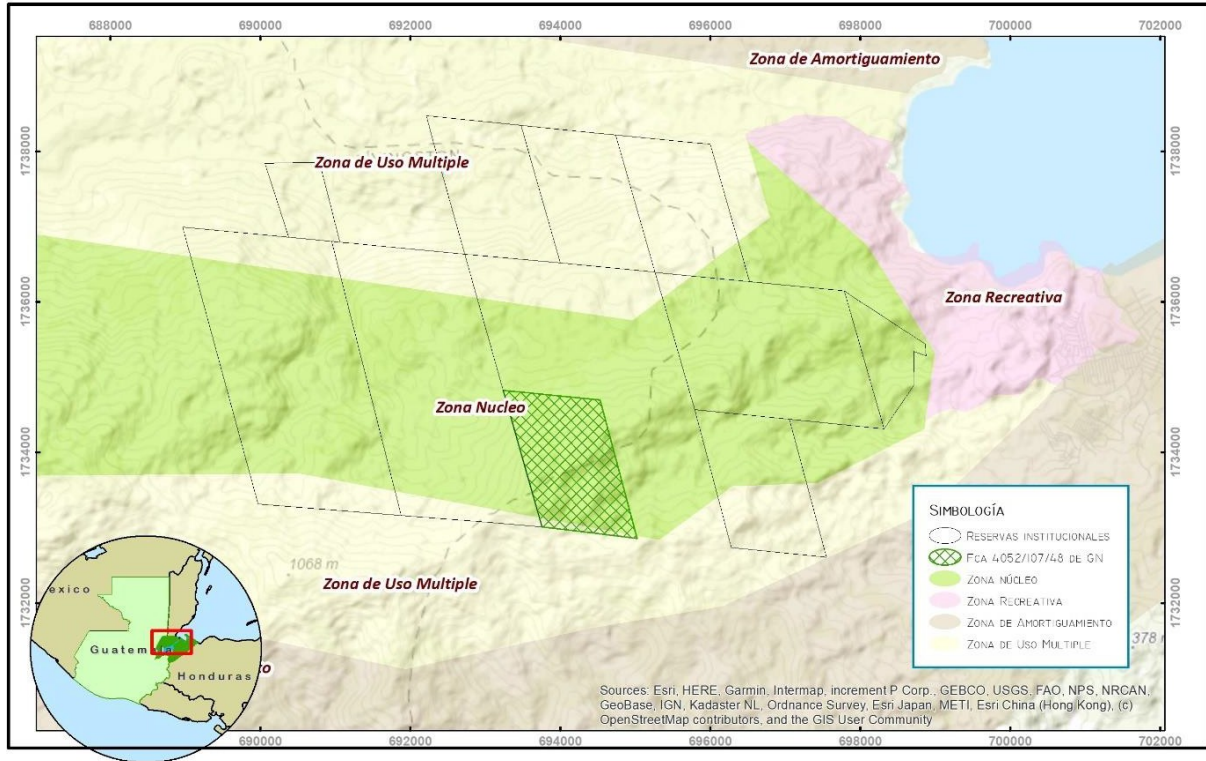
Maps and photos:



Finca 4052/107/48 de Grupo Norte
Propietario: Leonel Sisniega
Área: 5 caballerías



Map showing the Cerro San Gil Reserve (with yellow outlines); the thatched green area is the property to be acquired.



Map showing the same region and zones; thatched green area is the property to be acquired.

Photos showing Rio Tameja and the Cerro San Gil Reserve
(Photos courtesy FUNDAECO):



