

A Haven for Humans Becomes a Safe Harbour for Hispaniola's Hawks

By Jessica Schlarbaum – The Peregrine Fund

Dominican Republic, 22 May 2025 – Amongst the palm trees of Puntacana Resort & Club in the Dominican Republic, a quiet war against extinction is raging. Largely ignored by lounging tourists, pairs of small hawks are diligently tending to their young. The birds feel almost anachronistic in such a human-dominated landscape, but their presence here is no accident: the resort has become a haven for this recovering raptor species.



An adult Ridgway's Hawk perched on a palm frond. Dominican Republic. Photo by Bill Saltzstein.

When The Peregrine Fund first encountered the Ridgway's Hawk—a species found on the island of Hispaniola and nowhere else—in 2002, we discovered the birds faced a threat no wingspan could outmaneuver: human perception. Local communities viewed these hawks as chicken predators, leading to shooting and capturing that decimated their numbers. Fewer than 300 individuals remained, and the species was classified as Critically Endangered.

Our team launched an environmental education program that reaches into classrooms, community centers, and households across the region. Through immersive presentations, engaging classroom activities, empowering teacher workshops, colorful brochures, and personal door-to-door conversations, we began to see the tide of public opinion shift. But changing the attitudes of entire communities takes

time, and time was not something the Ridgway's Hawk could afford. Restoring the population by increasing breeding success was a top priority, so we focused our efforts on that while our environmental outreach program grew.



The Peregrine Fund's Hispaniola Program Director Marta Curti speaks to a group of schoolchildren with other Peregrine Fund staff and an ambassador Red-tailed Hawk. Photo by Bill Saltzstein.

When we initiated our recovery efforts, Ridgway's Hawks were found only in Los Haitises National Park in the northeast DR, so we started there. But with the entire species compressed into one population, a single threat such as a hurricane or disease outbreak could have had disastrous effects. To alleviate this risk, we began searching for new locations to establish additional populations. We finally settled on Punta Cana, in the east, an area where the last Ridgway's Hawk sighting had occurred in the late 1900s.

Enter Fundación Grupo Puntacana, a nonprofit subsidiary of Grupo Puntacana, dedicated to promoting socially and ecologically sustainable development. Grupo Puntacana also owns Punta Cana Resort & Club, a tranquil haven with beautifully manicured grounds and abundant palm trees (an important resource for Ridgway's Hawk nests). We worked with Fundación Grupo Puntacana to reintroduce and manage a population of hawks at the resort.

Among the first of their major impacts was reducing electrocution risks to the hawks by retrofitting power lines, a design that has since been used on over 200 power poles around Punta Cana. The partnership with Fundación Grupo Puntacana was critical to the success of the hawks' reintroduction to Punta Cana.



Ridgway's Hawk nestling sits in its nest. Photo by The Peregrine Fund.

With two successful populations in Los Haitises and Punta Cana, we expanded the reintroduction of Ridgway's Hawks to Aniana Vargas National Park in central DR and worked with partners in Les Cayemites, Haiti, to grow a newly-discovered small population. Additionally, our environmental education programs have sparked a remarkable transformation in community attitudes. Annual Ridgway's Hawk Day celebrations—May 25 in the Dominican Republic and August 19 in Haiti—stand as a joyful testament to this shifting perspective. Where hawks were once feared, they are now revered and elevated with community pride for this unique species.



Flying Ridgway's Hawk. Photo by Carlos Suarez.

Through this harmonious blend of education, hands-on nest management, strategic reintroductions, and innovative threat reduction, the Ridgway's Hawk population has doubled in just two decades and occupies multiple areas in Hispaniola. Yet, the species still wears its "Critically Endangered" status like a heavy burden. With support from Fundación Grupo Puntacana, Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, Fundación Propagas, and many more collaborators, The Peregrine Fund will continue working tirelessly to bring Ridgway's Hawks back to their historical homes.

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