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### Taxonomic studies change conservation priorities in the Caribbean Islands

To many people, taxonomy – the classification of organisms in an ordered system to indicate natural relationships – appears dry and irrelevant. However, recent taxonomic work in the Caribbean is providing fascinating revelations that will markedly change conservation priorities.

A paper late last year by William Hayes and collaborators in the *Bahamas Journal of Science* suggests that the country's lone brown-headed nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*) population, on Grand Bahama, should be recognized instead as a full, endemic species; the Bahama nuthatch (*Sitta insularis*). The study, supported by the Grand Bahama Power Company, distinguishes the new species on the basis of its longer bill, shorter wings, and distinctive vocalizations, and suggest that this imperiled bird should become a flagship for conservation efforts in the Bahamas. With a total of four surviving endemic bird species in the Bahamas, taxonomic revisions underway for a number of other birds, such as the West Indian woodpecker (*Melanerpes superciliaris*), could increase the global significance of conservation efforts in the country.



New research suggests that the brown-headed nuthatch (*Sitta pusilla*) should be recognized as a full species, endemic to Grand Bahama. Photo by Giff Beaton.

Conversely, a recent paper by Kristofer Helgen and Don Wilson in the *Journal of the Zoological Society of London* finally revealed that the Bahamian raccoon (*Procyon maynardi*) is, along with several other raccoon populations in the West Indies, actually only a relatively recent human-assisted invader of the country. Rather than being a number of distinct endemic species, these raccoons are actually a single species, the common northern raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), found throughout the nearby United States. Although the West Indian raccoons' conservation action plans acknowledge uncertainty over their taxonomic status, they are still listed as globally threatened by the [IUCN Red List](#) (a time lag that will be addressed by the Global Mammal Assessment). Indeed, in the light of this new knowledge, West Indian countries should now be urging the eradication rather than the conservation of these raccoons, since they are alien predators that threaten native species.

Both of these studies underscore, in contrasting ways, the critical importance of taxonomic research in guiding conservation action. In addition, they highlight the need for flexibility in conservation efforts to accommodate new taxonomic knowledge, and the need to find ways of explaining such dramatically changing conservation priorities to those outside the scientific community.

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